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BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER: CREATING AN ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATIVE CARE FOR STUDENTS AT RISK OF THEIR PROMISE

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BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER: CREATING AN ECOLOGY OF
TRANSFORMATIVE CARE FOR STUDENTS AT RISK OF THEIR PROMISE

A Dissertation
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership

by
Cherina Octavia Betters
December 2017

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ABSTRACT

The teacher-student relationship is multidimensional and fluid. This is especially true for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Educational leaders in the public school setting cannot control which students enroll at their school sites. The only thing teachers, as educational leaders in K-12 public education, have complete control over is the environment they create in their classrooms. Among those student groups most reflecting few gains on state and federal reports of proficiency data are students who typically come from backgrounds besieged with challenges or from historically underserved and marginalized communities. In this transcendental phenomenological study, the phenomenon investigated was how secondary teachers described their experiences in building relationships with students identified as at promise. A secondary public school setting was the focus of this study. The intent of this study was to understand the essence of the lived experiences of teachers as they described their experiences in building relationships with at-promise youth. Teachers must leverage themselves in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with their students. In shifting the adverse narrative about the political identity used to categorize these students, the antipathetic mindset related to these students in public schools too shall shift. Research has demonstrated that at-promise students respond best in school settings that provide a culture where teachers intentionally construct a caring interaction laden with respect and recognition. It is important to foster agency in at-promise

students through the understanding of the social, political, and economic structures that served to impact their generational past, inform their present, and prepare their future. This research study focused on the complex dynamic of the teacher-student relationship. This research investigation connected the important role teachers play in the lives of their students, teacher mindset about at-promise student success, and how strong and positive teacher-student relationships have the potential to encourage agency in at-promise students through meaningful recognition of their promise for academic success over their presupposed risks. This study's findings highlight the critical need for teachers to create intentional opportunities to foster strong teacher-student relationships with at-promise students.

Keywords: teacher-student relationships, secondary education, at-risk students, at-promise students

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all six of my wonderfully talented, kind, supportive, and beautiful children: Chan'tel, Monai, De'Brae, Chase, Jada, and CeCe. I hope my actions inspire you to live up to the promise God has placed in each of you. To my grandson, Landen, your life force is a blessing to this family; may you always know the light you are to this earth. To my godchildren, Ethan, Christina, Faith, and Elijah, may each of you grow to have a friend as valued to you as your mother has been to me. To my grandmother, Lavern Chase, thank you for introducing me to God. You would be so proud of the relationship He and I share. Your work ethic, dedication to family, and selflessness have been the perfect legacy that I now hope to leave as my own legacy. Lastly, to all my family and friends who prayed over me and with me. Thank you for standing by my side over my lifetime and especially during this educational journey. I appreciate each of you more than I can express in words. From the bottom of my heart, all of you are loved. Count it all joy!

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.

—Carl Jung, *The Development of Personality*

Teaching in the K-12 public education system is a demanding job. Teachers are charged with educating students today who will grow up to lead society tomorrow. However, it is a constantly evolving profession strained by pressures to meet national, state, and district expectations of student proficiency through standardized testing. Student proficiency is often viewed as the teacher's ability to set high standards of achievement and rigor that eventually is measured by the students' displaying academic achievement on standardized tests. The paradoxical truth is that parents are sending their best students to schools and teachers are engaged in teaching students, yet students are still deficient in the skills needed to be considered grade-level proficient as measured by state and national standardized tests. This duality has left many teachers feeling as though they are engaged in educational warfare, battling how to teach students in a meaningful way that meets their educational needs yet moves all students along a continuum that demonstrates mastery of content as measured

by universal standardized tests. Unfortunately, the casualties tend to be in the form of the most vulnerable students in the classroom. Among those student groups most reflecting few gains on state and federal reports of proficiency data are students who typically come from backgrounds besieged with challenges or from historically underserved and marginalized communities (Espinoza, 2011; Rodriguez, 2008).

However, the one thing that appears paramount to the process of education is the connection between the act of educating through relationship building and the future success of the students. An underdeveloped key component to that connection is the importance of relationships between teachers and students. School reform and school reformers have engaged in dialogue that views school culture as a determinant to student achievement (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Vasquez Heilig, Ward, Weisman, & Cole, 2014). There has been considerable debate within the field of K-12 public education about what is good for students. State and federal legislators are continually writing and rewriting laws in hopes of defining policy and practice that is boldly proclaimed to the constituency as the panacea of increasing student engagement and decreasing student dropout rates.

In 2013, the state of California enacted legislation restructuring how schools are funded through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF; Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). How schools are to plan for expenditures based on this new funding formula will be accounted for through the

Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). The LCAP template that all school districts must follow has to directly account for and allocate resources to the state's identified priorities, such as school climate and historically underserved populations recognized as English language learners, foster care youth, and students from low-income families (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Positive and caring teacher-student relationships are critical to a healthy school culture. Positive teacher-student relationships wrought with care are necessary in the efforts to decrease staggering student dropout rates and low student achievement (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008). Noddings (1995) posited that teacher-student relationships wrought with care not only enhance the engagement and learning experiences of students but also create a school culture of caring that is then extended from the students out into society at large.

A critical component to building a positive relational exchange between teachers and students is for teachers to intentionally recognize students' contributions to the school environment in such a way that the students feel cared for (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012). A large portion of students who have been categorized as at risk also fall into one or all of the three subgroup populations of students targeted by the state of California. The common denominator of this focus on students as well as the key priorities listed by the state is that all are grounded in negative educational discourse surrounding students classified as at risk. Students fall into this classification under various

qualifying factors. To be identified as at risk, a student only needs to be a child or youth exhibiting the quality of coming from a disadvantaged demographic (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). Unfortunately, the very qualification of being an at-risk student means the child or youth is considered to be predisposed to and exhibiting factors for potential school and life failure (Franklin, 2013). A few of these factors are being English language learners, low socioeconomic status, not living in the home of one or both natural parent(s), and school truancy or chronic absenteeism (Johnson, 1997; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Schools have been entrusted with the authority of educating all students with the same zeal and motivation. This system of trust has long guided schools, as socializing institutions, to give knowledge and skill sets so that children will become adults prepared to contribute to the larger society. However, students who are marginalized by their school communities are often denied these unwritten societal expectations (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). The state of California has created legislation through the LCFF and the LCAP with a focus on students who come from disadvantaged and historically marginalized populations (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Key components in all attempts to overcome the challenges of educating students identified as at risk are the beliefs and attitudes cultivated by the teachers about at-risk students (Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Often, those beliefs and values stem from an a priori mindset and the culture of schools as well as the expectations, or lack thereof, of the school culture. It is important to explore how educators in those environments seek to

describe their experiences with students who come from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Dweck (2006) advanced a theory about the way in which people's mindsets affect their lives. After researching how children viewed failure, she reasoned that people fall into one of two categories as it relates to their core values and beliefs: a growth mindset or a fixed mindset. Dweck viewed the growth mindset as encouraging the cultivation of thinking rooted in the belief that obstacles to gaining new skills and knowledge are surmountable through effort and hard work. The fixed mindset is the belief that all abilities and skill sets are innate and therefore constant and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006).

The very term used to identify students who may require extra support to foster their skills and grow their knowledge, *at risk*, is situated in a fixed mindset of predetermined outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Emerging educational literature steeped in psychology has developed terminology that encompasses a growth mindset. This mental model challenges the deficit-thinking model that assesses students by their challenges instead of by their promise of school success (Franklin, 2013; Sanders & Jordan, 2013; Senge, 2013; Valencia, 2012). Framing students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds as at promise rather than at risk creates space for students who are marginalized in their school communities for coming from a disadvantaged background. How teachers come to view students who are categorized as at risk goes a long way into how teachers create meaning about that specific student

population. It is important to remember that teachers are individuals with hearts, minds, experiences, opinions, and thoughts that all work together to define and shape their relationships and experiences with at-risk students (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Problem Statement

It is assumed by proximity and purpose that teachers forge positive relationships with all of their students (Noddings, 1995; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2008). However, the most vulnerable of student populations within schools, preidentified as needing extra support due to extraneous circumstances that place them at risk of school failure, are often the ones that most need strong and positive relationships with teachers and other adults in their school communities. Sadly, it is these vulnerable student populations that are most neglected in their school communities (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). The state of California has enacted legislation that requires school districts to create a culture of connectedness and belonging by targeting students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In California, lawmakers have enacted legislation to finance the state's schooling system known as the LCFF (Cabral & Chu, 2013). The landmark legislation also included a mandate that schools account for special/high-needs student populations who have historically underperformed by mandating school districts to specifically plan and set goals for those targeted student groups through the LCAP (Cabral & Chu, 2013;

Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). High-need student populations are defined as English language learners, foster care youth, and low-income students (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Planning on how to best educate these specific students requires the school system to provide environments that foster strong, positive, and caring teacher-student relationships that recognize the students' humanity and dignity.

The challenges faced by these children and youth are usually beyond the control of the students yet are seen as potential barriers to their school success. In an attempt to decrease the factors that have been identified as predisposing conditions for failure to advance through the K-12 public education system, school districts, through the state of California's accountability plan, are required to evaluate the needs of their student populations and provide protective measures to directly impact their ability to achieve academic success (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Unfortunately, assessing students' potential for success solely based on their perceived risk of school failure is extremely problematic, because it assumes these students are liabilities to the school environment rather than assets (Franklin, 2013; Sanders & Jordan, 2013). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds might instead be viewed for their promise of school success (Franklin, 2013).

Students identified as at risk are repeatedly presented to teachers as those who require the most effort and are most difficult to work with (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). In this era of high-stakes testing, schools have routinely applied

negative meaning to students by attaching identities to students based on a fixed mindset supported by a negative educational discourse about students' abilities, skills, and family backgrounds (Dweck, 2006; Perumal, 2006; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2008; Sanders & Jordan, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

Students are consistently reduced to their formal or informal ability to successfully navigate the school curriculum, both hidden and explicit, and master standardized tests (Rodriguez, 2008; Wren, 1999). Deficit thinking advances the belief that students identified as at risk lack the abilities and skills to overcome their disadvantages (Valencia, 2012). This allows educators to predetermine the investment they make in the students as it relates to the formation of a positive teacher-student relationship (Pianta et al., 2003).

Harper and Quaye (2015) cited the very use of the term “at-risk student” as “one of the most unfair terms used in American education, in P-12 and higher education alike” (p. 11). It is because of this deficit thinking that permanently advances negative discourse in education philosophy, practice, and reform about students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds that, for the purpose of this research study, I chose to refer to at-risk students as at-promise students. In shifting the adverse narrative about the political identity used to categorize these students, the antipathetic mindset and maligned discourse related to these students in public schools too shall shift (Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010). Research has demonstrated time and time again that at-promise students respond best in school settings that provide a culture where teachers

intentionally construct a caring interaction laden with respect and recognition (Bartolome, 1994; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Ginwright, 2010; Johnson, 1997; Muller, 2001; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). The amount of care that is put forth by the teachers in cementing strong and positive relationships at the secondary level is a phenomenon researchers are still exploring (Ginwright, 2010; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). This study adds to that body of research through the examination of how secondary teachers define, describe, and experience relationships with students categorized as at risk of school failure.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how teachers in a secondary school setting within the Inland Empire in Southern California describe their relationship experiences with their at-risk students. There is literature examining the impact of the teacher-student relationship and its connection to student engagement and achievement (Bartolome, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002). The importance of the teacher-student relationship is something that is hard to measure because of its subjectivity, yet it is easy to chronicle over time by the reported outcomes as children transition from being students in K-12 education

to adults in the larger society (Franklin, 2013; Harper & Quaye, 2015; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Therefore, with some exceptions, those who educate and those who are taught are uniquely cemented in a perpetual relational state. This occurs from the earliest of formative years (preschool/kindergarten) to the end of compulsory education that concludes at Grade 12. An objective of this research was to aid teachers, schools, school districts, and any other person or organization with a stake in education with a lens to view the interaction between teachers and students in a secondary setting. Most importantly, however, the primary objective of this study was to identify how teacher-student relationships wrought with transformative care are internalized by the teachers charged with teaching students who have been deemed at risk of school failure.

Research Question

To understand the teacher-student relationship as experienced by secondary teachers of at-risk youth in a middle school setting, the research approach of transcendental phenomenology was used. This study was empirically driven using a combination of secondary data analysis, field notes, and the interview process to document the human experiences of the participants as they applied understanding and meaning to the work they did in their relationships with students. This research did not serve as a tool to generalize about the population of teachers. However, it did capture the experiences of the

teachers as they saw their interactions with students who were identified as at risk or disadvantaged. The research question for this study was as follows:

1. How do secondary teachers in a middle school setting describe their experiences in building relationships with students identified as at promise?

Significance of the Study

This research study adds to the existing literature concerning the process and experiences of secondary teachers in the Inland Empire in Southern California as they describe their teacher-student relationships and how they depict their interactions with students identified as at risk of school failure. This study not only expands the conversation about positive teacher-student relationships at the secondary level and specifically in the middle school setting, but it also examines those relationships as they relate to a marginalized student group. Ultimately, this study hopes to serve a transformative purpose for teachers and all those involved with the education system, because it can advance discourse in educational arenas about the importance and value of positive and caring relationships between teachers and students.

These relationships must denote the importance of teachers' recognizing their students in meaningful ways and using the process of education to truly change the trajectories of marginalized students' lives. Furthermore, the review of the literature offered in Chapter Two of this study demonstrates that it is only

through intentional acts by the teachers that real learning and opportunities will occur that might shift educational stakeholders from viewing students in terms of risk to viewing students in terms of success. Knowing that positive, healthy, and authentic caring relationships are beneficial to the at-risk students is not enough; systematic planning is needed for how the school and classroom environment will be created to make that success happen well and regularly (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). This study will ideally help to enlighten educational stakeholders about the power they hold to change their mindset and, in doing so, transform the schooling process from a focus on paperwork to a focus on people work.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Using the theoretical lenses of care and recognition, this research sought to stretch beyond typical understandings of teacher-student relationships by reaching into how teachers apply meaning to their relationships with students identified as at risk (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Ginwright, 2010; Noddings, 1995; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Rodriguez (2012) created a framework to examine the practices of teachers as they relate to students from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. He named this theoretical lens the pedagogy of recognition. Viewed as praxis, it serves to recognize students intentionally and systematically. The lenses of recognition are categorized as follows: curricular recognition, contextualizing recognition, pedagogical recognition, transformative

recognition, and relational recognition (Rodriguez, 2012). This theoretical framework is described in greater detail in Chapter Two of this research study.

Current educational literature isolates elements of how and why teachers' and students' interactions impact learning. Yet overall, the literature is lacking in detailing a multifaceted approach toward understanding how and why those elements operate together. How elements such as classroom/school culture, educational policies, teacher mindset, teacher care, and student recognition come together to inform teachers' relationships with students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or are categorized as at risk is a phenomenon worth underscoring in educational literature. In this phenomenological study, teachers' relationships with at-risk students were explored in a meaningful and robust way in an effort to identify ways in which teachers can arrange their classrooms and school environments to provide a culture of care and recognition for students, as outlined by Rodriguez (2012).

Assumptions

This study presumes that interviewing teachers who work with students considered at risk of school failure is a valid way to account for the beliefs and values held by teachers about at-risk students. This study also presumes that teachers' interactions with students can be readily identified as already possessing features of care. The study thus sought to avoid seeking deficits in teachers as well as in students. It is further presumed that teachers are a

necessary component to the culture of their classrooms and schools. Finally, it is presumed that this study adds to the body of educational research detailing teacher-student relationships with at-risk children and youth at the secondary school level.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to a secondary school setting because educational research is scant in the study of teacher-student relationships at this level. This study was further delimited to the investigation of teachers' relationships with at-risk students as opposed to an emphasis on teachers' relationships with all students because of new educational policies predicated on the belief that strengthening relationships between teachers and their at-risk students correlates to these students' academic achievement. Other delimitations stemmed from the difficulty of recruiting participants due to the specificity of the phenomenon studied. Another delimitation was the time involved in gathering data as well as the difficulty of interpreting and analyzing the data. Lastly, teachers' mindsets and perspectives capturing the essence of their experiences with at-risk children and youth at the secondary level are mostly nonexistent in educational literature.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms, arranged here in alphabetical order, are used throughout this study:

At promise: Terminology used to refer to students who are currently being defined in the educational discourse as at risk. This language allows students to be framed by a focus on the academic promise they bring to the school system instead of a measurement of their supposed risks (Franklin, 2013).

At risk: Any child or youth stemming from one of the following conditions:

substance abuse, illegal activity, school truancy, suspension, expulsion and failure, poor parenting, familial transience, poverty, English as a foreign language, residing in the inner-city, counterproductive sibling behaviors such as dropping out of school and criminal activities, lone-parent families, lack of extracurricular involvement, poor home-school relations, ethnic minority status, and having an uneducated mother.

(Johnson, 1997, p. 36)

Deficit thinking: Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are assumed to lack the cognitive ability to fully achieve academically and, coupled with maladaptive behavior and a lack of motivation for learning, show little promise of being able to overcome deficiencies associated with the class, culture, or family to which they belong (Valencia, 2012).

Fixed mindset: The belief that human characteristics such as intelligence, personality, and skills are all predetermined and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006).

Growth mindset: The belief that intelligence is something that can be developed through hard work, persistence, effort, and strong focus over time (Dweck, 2006).

Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP): State of California legislative mandate detailing how school districts must plan to address the state's eight priorities defined as the dominant factors in producing a top-performing educational program (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF): The state of California's 2013 educational school reform that determines how K-12 public schools will be funded and accounted for in the state (Cabral & Chu, 2013).

Radical care: As coined by Ginwright (2010), defined as the "political acts that encourage youth to heal from trauma by confronting injustice and oppression in their lives" (p. 56).

Recognition: The illumination of students' voices and experiences in the class and school setting by setting goals and high expectations for students that challenge them to persevere in academic pursuits and through personal trials (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012).

School culture: The informal (and formal) set of guidelines that work behind the scenes to shape the school environment. These guidelines include school customs, traditions, and expectations for academic achievement and acceptable behavior (Peterson & Deal, 1998).

Secondary schools: Schools that provide education to students past the primary years; typically marked by Grades 6-12.

Social capital: Does not have a clear and undisputed meaning but is usually utilized by its function. This research study utilized Coleman's (1988) definition that views social capital as part of a social structure of relational exchanges where resources between social actors within the structure negotiate certain actions such as trust, reciprocity, and respect.

Summary

There will always be some educators who will want to limit their views of students to how they met those students. Often, educators will define a student as measured by one snapshot in time. There is more to at-promise students than how they have been positioned in educational literature describing their risks. A framework of transformative care does not guarantee an outcome of academic success for students engaged in overcoming factors that presuppose school and life failures. It does, however, allow students, through a transformative caring environment, to establish educational outlooks that encourage resiliency and agency (Ginwright, 2010; Noddings, 1995). It is important to foster agency in at-promise students through the understanding of the social, political, and economic structures that served to impact their generational past, inform their present, and prepare their future (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Identifying and grouping students based on their challenges is framing how the world treats them, how society views them, and how schools are trained to

(dis)believe in their abilities. Framing, therefore, in this case, is as important as the picture (the at-promise students), because the way in which educators think about at-promise students is deeply connected to the personal past experiences that teachers have experienced themselves (Pianta et al., 2003). Stakeholders in the educational community of K-12 public schools can offer a new framework so that this system can change. Risks in the business world are often measured by the return, on investment. In K-12 public education, there will never be a return if the school community does not rebuke the factors of risk by investing in building transformative caring relationships with at-promise children and youth.

This study not only expands the conversation about the research on teacher-student relationships at the secondary level and specifically in the middle school setting, but it also examined those relationships as they relate to a marginalized student group. Ultimately, this study can serve a transformative purpose for teachers and all those involved with the education system, because it can serve to advance discourse in educational arenas about the importance and value of positive and caring relationships between teachers and students.

These relationships must denote the importance of teachers' recognizing their students in meaningful ways and using the process of education to truly effect change in the schooling process. It will only be through intentional acts of the teachers that real learning and opportunities will occur that will shift the cultures of schools to viewing at-promise students in terms of their success, rather than in terms of risk.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two consists of a review of the literature examining aspects of teachers' relationships with students defined as at risk of school failure in a secondary public school setting. More specifically, it is the examination of policies, procedures, practices, and discourses that are used to frame the relationships between at-risk students and the educators charged with teaching them. Unfortunately, educators have a tendency to only focus on isolated aspects of their contributions to the schooling process in an effort to determine how and why the process of schooling is not successful for all students. In reality, it is a myriad of visible and invisible parts that come together as interconnected actions over several years that affect how successful students are in schools (Senge, 2013). This literature review first focuses on the parts that come together to form the whole of the work that is needed to educate and empower educators in their roles with students from marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

First, the review of literature focuses on the characteristics of teacher-student relationships. This is a multifaceted approach to viewing teachers' relationships with at-risk students, including a consideration of the importance of recognition and various levels of care for students labeled at risk. Second, the term *at risk* is defined and juxtaposed with another term found in the literature, *at*

promise. The third section highlights how the mindsets of teachers have larger implications for how their relationships with at-risk students are defined, described, and experienced. The fourth section highlights teachers' relationships with at-risk students within the context of school culture. Finally, California's 2013 school finance legislation, known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) via the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), is reviewed, specifically in relation to the value that has been placed on school connectedness for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The teacher-student relationship is pivotal for children as they learn to interact with the adult world and develop a context for what those relationships mean (Pianta et al., 2002). However, as Stine, Stine, and Blacker (2012) noted, "The human side of relationships and many aspects of trust and understanding are often left untouched and unexplored when we speak of institutions, and in particular, the schools" (p. 95). Pianta et al. (2002) examined the strategies that they believed fostered a close teacher-student relationship. By compiling ten years of data on teacher-student relationships, they developed a four-pronged system illustrating the parts of the teacher-student relationship: "(1) selected features of the two individuals themselves, (2) each individual's understanding of the relationship, (3) the process by which student and teacher exchange

information, and (4) the external influences of the systems in which the relationship is embedded” (Pianta et al., 2002, p. 93).

Pianta et al. (2002) included the biological makeup of the teacher and student as important features in the relationship dynamic. They concluded that factors such as temperament, belief systems, and even personality traits shape the interactions of teachers with their students and of students with their teachers. Coleman (1988) defined this relational exchange as *social capital* where both actors in the relationship process mutually participate in the exchange of negotiated resources. Understanding teachers as participants in the interaction and not just as the controllers of the interaction allows for the teacher’s perspective of the student to help mold how that teacher will interact with the student (Muller, 2001; Pianta et al., 2003). Pianta et al. (2002) explained it this way: “Teachers’ representation of relationships (particularly how they process negative emotion and experiences with the child) is related to how the teacher actually behaves with the child” (p. 94). If a teacher attaches a negative value or association to the student, the relationship will in turn have a negative undertone because, as Godin (2012) posited, “teachers who care teach students who care” (p. 21), and in reverse, teachers who demonstrate ill-will toward students will more than likely have that feeling reciprocated as part of the negotiation of social capital.

Therefore, leaders in schools should expect negative interactions to occur and remedy them through training teachers (as well as students) in how to

overcome these negative exchanges to their interactions (Pianta et al., 2002).

Pianta et al. (2002) noted that students had favorable reports about their relationships with teachers when they felt their school environment was positive and the teachers cared for them in the classroom. Children who struggle in the education system (typically marked by problematic behavior, lack of skills, and low achievement) are more susceptible to negative future student outcomes when the teacher-student relationship is not strong or is marred with negativity (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). According to Pianta et al. (2002),

Improved relationships between teachers and students can be a focus of intervention efforts and a by-product of other efforts directed at children, teachers, classrooms, or schools. In particular, student-teacher relationships can be improved by targeting the organizational ethos and structure of the school or classroom as well as by targeting social interactions between teachers and children. (p. 98)

Sanders and Jordan (2013) discussed perceptions held by students about their relationships with teachers. Relational factors were defined as teacher supportiveness and expectations held by the teacher for the student. Ultimately, the research investigated whether students believed teachers held their best interests at heart and if believed, would that translate to students investing in sound decisions to increase their academic achievement. The study pulled from prior research on student motivation, engagement, and dropout rates; the examination of existing literature in social psychology, which placed a significant

emphasis on the adult relationships that students experienced in the school setting; and the collection of data from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Survey. Sanders and Jordan investigated the categories of teacher expectations and teacher supportiveness as the qualifiers for the relationship status. These indicators were used at the 10th-grade and 12th-grade levels and were examined in the study. Sanders and Jordan sought to discover whether there was a connection between student achievement (as measured by grade point average and standardized test scores) for 12th-grade students and the students' perceptions of the relationships with their teachers.

Sanders and Jordan (2013) found that positive teacher-student relationships not only correlated to positive student achievement but also strongly influenced behaviors such as classroom readiness, avoidance of negative behaviors, and overall positive school conduct. This was especially true in regard to students identified as being at risk of school failure. In conducting this multiple regression study, Sanders and Jordan also found these results to be consistent across student classifications such as gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic standing. A final key finding revealed that students who perceived teachers as caring, positive, and supportive as well as holding high expectations for their success were more likely to want to build a relationship with the teachers. Ultimately, this led to the students having positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

The very act of being a teacher mandates a more personal interaction when compared to other professions (Pianta et al., 2003). Teachers who work toward relational gains with students rather than behavioral measures increase academic performance in the long term (Pianta et al., 2003). Interaction among teachers and students is also based on things such as temperament and communication skills of both the teacher and the student (Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002). It is important to view the teacher as a whole person with his or her own personal stories of relationships and experiences within educational institutions prior to current relationships with children (Pianta et al., 2003). These factors then serve as indicators of the teacher's current attitudes and beliefs toward students. There is a difference between the act of teaching and the act of relationship building with students. Pianta et al. (2003) postulated, "Despite a general recognition that teacher characteristics and perceptions influence the practice of teaching, little is known about how individual teacher characteristics and perceptions impact the formation of their relationships with children" (p. 207). Cozolino (2014) maintained, "Teachers are humans first and professionals second. This means that our prejudices, moods, and changing states of mind all influence how we relate to others" (p. 148). It is important to make clear that teachers, in part, depend on their own past experiences with people they value as key to the formation of who they are as teachers (Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002). The reality of the teaching profession is that the very first time a

teacher interacts with a student in his or her classroom, the beginnings of a relationship emerge.

Based on the teacher's perception of the student and the student's perception of the teacher, these relationships can be harvested for good or the classroom setting can be one of tremendous upheaval for both over the course of their school year together (Pianta et al., 2002). A pivotal aspect of the teacher-student relationship is the ability of teachers to confirm the value of their students through authentic interactions, such as welcoming the students into the classroom or acknowledging them around the school campus (Pianta et al., 2002; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Teacher-student relationships are a key component in the formation of school culture or climate as well (Pianta et al., 2003).

Humans are relational beings (Starratt, 2013). From that declaration, Starratt (2013) espoused, "We cannot define or express ourselves unless it is in relationship to others" (p. 55). Teachers must form authentic relationships with their students as they are and not for whom they wish them to be (Starratt, 2013). By recognizing that every student learns differently, because of the uniqueness of his or her past experiences both academically and personally, teachers can engage the hearts, minds, and imaginations of students as they explore curriculum that informs their students of the challenges they face and the opportunities they can construct from them (Rodriguez, 2012; Starratt, 2013). In the end, teachers must recognize cultural differences and their shared humanity

with students in order to be fully present and promote efficacy in learning through the curriculum they teach and toward the creation of a positive teacher-student relationship (Godin, 2012; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Starratt, 2013).

Ecology of Care

It is critical that teachers work to achieve positive relationships with their students. These relationships must leave the students with the genuine feeling that they are valued and needed in the classroom and in the greater school community. Seminal work on how teachers should care for their students by Noddings (1995) concluded, “We will not achieve even meager success unless our children believe that they are themselves cared for and learn to care for others” (p. 675). Children and youth are faced with difficulties in the modern schooling process, and for some, those difficulties become insurmountable on the path of compulsory K-12 education (Ginwright, 2010). These difficulties include violence, abuse, and neglect in their home lives (Ginwright, 2010). In addition to consistent and real threats in their home lives, students are forced to become accustomed to participating in disaster-readiness drills in schools that focus on terror threats that may breach the security of their school walls. These threats are now a substantial part of everyday life for American students and cannot be ignored. The new school normal includes jargon such as *school bullying*, *credible terrorist threat*, and *active school shooter*. Many school districts are reporting the use of disaster-preparedness practices known as active-shooter

drills that simulate a perpetrator carrying out violence against students and staff alike in schools. Therefore, in many of the K-12 schools across the nation, teaching is wrought with an expectation that teachers are able, prepared, and willing to care for students far beyond the context of reading, writing, and mathematics.

Schools and the needs of students are evolving a lot faster than the process of schooling is making room for (Godin, 2012). This evolution has placed students and school personnel on a constant high alert over possible physical, emotional, or mental threats as part of their daily lived experience (Ginwright, 2010). The amalgamation of challenges has steadily made it evident that teachers must abandon obsolete theories and practices of teaching that situate students as simple receivers of information and schools as institutions to reinforce simplistic and obedient behavioral skills to be exercised in the greater society (Ginwright, 2010; Godin, 2012; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Teachers today must now insist on empowering students to address society as it now presents itself: traumatic, scared, and broken. Current school stakeholders and critics are debating school reform and seeking to address assessment and academic achievement for students to be successful (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Noddings's (1995) interpretation of how schools should work to achieve those ends is an important first step, because she understood that in order to produce student populations that excel academically, schools must consider the whole child. Children are the summation of their life experiences in and outside of the

schooling process, and those experiences must be met with elements of care at the personal and curricular levels for students to be successful.

Noddings (1995) asserted that there are several reasons to choose to incorporate themes of caring into the school environment. First, she theorized that care as part of curriculum will build capacity in the students' cultural literacy. She reasoned that cultural literacy enhances students' ability to connect to experiences relative to who they are that cannot be found in traditional curriculum, and this connection will help to inspire them personally as well as increase their learning. Second, she viewed themes of care as cross-curricular endeavors to engage students in learning by not limiting subject matter to being content-specific. In this method of caring, teachers teach about their content-specific subject matter while incorporating elements of other disciplines.

Noddings viewed this as providing a sense of "wholeness" for the students in their educational pursuits (p. 676). Third, Noddings argued that themes of care in teaching provide a framework for students to understand the *what* and *how* of life by allowing them to think existentially. Fourth, by incorporating and instructing on themes of care, teachers are creating spaces for students to see their lives as connected to the larger community, which will enable them to be more caring of others around them. This level of caring for students does not happen in a vacuum. It is only through acts and themes of care that students, especially the most vulnerable ones, are able to view their place in the world and society as something they too can create and harvest and will come to value their

contributions to it. It is because of the introduction of themes of caring at a basic human level of need that the teachers, as critical relationship partners, are able to create the needed positive connection between the teachers as caregivers and the students as those being cared for (Noddings, 1995).

Building on Noddings's (1995) foundation of care in the school setting is the assertion that schools must support structures that allow and encourage teachers to find curriculum and agree on core values in caring that should be taught on an ongoing basis in schools, particularly at the secondary level where "students desperately need to engage in the study and practice of caring" (p. 676). Noddings recognized that caring brings a high level of vulnerability to both the student and teacher as part of the relational exchange. Hence, teachers must be literate and prepared to relate to children and youth as they navigate conflict, deal with death, and face exposure to drugs and sex. Noddings insisted that teachers are capable of managing these real-life realities and that schools should invest in their teachers and take advantage of the caring relationships teachers establish with their students. It is extremely difficult for students to separate their emotional frames from their academic frames, meaning they do not live as fragmented pieces but as a whole, whether in the school setting or out in society (Noddings, 1995).

Noblit et al. (1995), during the 1989-1990 school year, spent one day a week in two teachers' classes. One was a Caucasian fourth-grade teacher and the other an African American second-grade teacher. The purpose of their study

was to view how each constructed caring in her classroom. Caring, for Noblit et al., was an element of the class and school culture that went beyond all technical aspects of learning and pierced the relational factors that amalgamated good teaching, student achievement, and social ability. Noblit et al. stated, “Caring is essential to education and may guide the ways we instruct and discipline students, set policy, and organize the school day” (p. 680). The study was situated in an inner-city K-5 elementary school. Noblit et al. described the 307 students as mostly low income, although this was mainly true for the 65% of students who were African American while the other 35% of students were Caucasian and moved to private schools for secondary instruction. The school had 22 teachers and eight teacher assistants (Noblit et al., 1995).

Pam, the African American second-grade teacher, was an interesting element to Noblit et al.’s (1995) study. Pam was described exemplifying a teaching style that was stern but inviting. With one particular student who was quite withdrawn, Pam began to assert expectations that required him to sit up front in the classroom, participate in class discussions, and work with other students. She would routinely place her hand on his shoulder as a signal of support and authorization to speak and participate at appropriate times. This form of physical touch for the student eventually shifted to eye contact. as the student was able to build confidence and see his own value in relation to his participation in the class dynamic. The initial observation of this process was intriguing to the authors, who noted that “[Pam] organized instruction around a

series of collective rituals, in a style once common in segregated African-American schools” (Noblit et al., 1995, p. 681). By the completion of the once-a-week, yearlong observation of the dynamic between Pam and the reluctant student, the relationship between the two had blossomed so congruently that the entire culture of the classroom shifted, because students viewed that relationship as an extension of themselves, and they themselves felt safe and nurtured. Noblit et al. concluded that the teacher-student relationship through the vehicle of responsive caring (process of respecting, understanding, and recognizing the student) by the teacher was how all other aspects of teaching (instruction, classroom management, planning, and discipline) fostered connections that may otherwise have not occurred in the process of learning in schools.

Noblit et al. (1995) reported that both of their focus teachers were evaluated as “highly effective” (p. 681), even though both had different teaching pedagogies. The commonality was their potency in being responsive teachers who cared for their students. Learning does not take place in the absence of care (Noblit et al., 1995). However, Noblit et al. asserted that caring relationships are not static. Relationships have a beginning, middle, and future for students. For the caring environment to be harvested, care must be a continuous aspect of the classroom environment (Noblit et al., 1995). Caring teacher-student relationships work with mutual respect and can largely replace the punitive outcomes associated with school or classroom disciplinary management. Noblit et al. quoted a student from the class taught by Martha, the Caucasian fourth-

grade teacher, on the importance of caring in the teacher-student relationship: “If a teacher doesn’t care about you, it affects your mind. You feel like you’re nobody, and it makes you want to drop out of school” (p. 683). More important than the possibility of care are the opportunities that caring creates for students as they navigate the school system and ultimately the real world.

Those invested in the current state of K-12 education must call on schools and teachers to recognize the needs of their students to be cared for and valued. Teachers, as key stakeholders in the school community, must critically examine their roles in the lives of students, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are identified in the school community as at risk. Johnson (1997) described at-risk students as any children or youth stemming from one of the following conditions:

substance abuse, illegal activity, school truancy, suspension, expulsion and failure, poor parenting, familial transience, poverty, English as a foreign language, residing in the inner-city, counterproductive sibling behaviors such as dropping out of school and criminal activities, lone-parent families, lack of extracurricular involvement, poor home-school relations, ethnic minority status, and having an uneducated mother. (p. 36)

Johnson’s investigation into the quantity of students these factors impact placed the range of at-risk students in schools around the world to be between one half and one third of all students. There are a number of students who face one or more of these identified factors yet have overall positive student and life

outcomes. It is not enough to assume or even prefer that the educational care students need to be productive citizens of society is being taught at home. Instead, teachers must position themselves to advocate and promote strong, positive, and healthy caring relationships with their students.

The form of care described above is foundational to the emotional, social, and pedagogical needs of the 21st-century K-12 students, especially those identified as at risk of school failure. Modern-day complexities for students of dealing with ongoing toxic levels of stress, abuse (both physical and mental), violence, bullying, and terror, as mentioned previously, require a more detailed and succinct method of care. Ginwright (2010) conducted research on one such approach of care aimed to combat toxic stress and ongoing trauma faced by students. Ginwright studied an after-school program called Leadership Excellence in Oakland, California, that spanned a 2-year period. The program design provided a positive, politically minded, and critically conscious environment for African American youth in the area. Based on interviews with the youth and participant observations, Ginwright argued that educators have not given enough credence to how trauma impacts the formal educational and overall development youth undergo. He examined how these youth lived through traumatic experiences as part of the everyday landscape of their lives, while trying to understand their stories and recognize how these experiences stunted their academic growth. Although Ginwright's study is a representation of the collective experiences of African American urban youth within Oakland and its

surrounding cities, it also speaks to the larger issues of all youth coming from environments and communities characterized by violence, economic devastation, or systemic political and social alienation.

Using a framework he called radical care, Ginwright (2010) demonstrated how leveraging the act of radical care in relationship--building with youth has the potential to positively transform how youth from marginalized populations can reconfigure their political voice, identity, and power from within themselves and extend that beyond to the outside world. Ginwright layered radical care as the collection of hope, possibility, and love that engages and teaches youth to act on their own behalf in the pursuit of justice and liberty. In this equation, the adult or teacher moves away from ideas and “beliefs about care as simply compassion, to more radical ideas about care that foster critical consciousness and encourage changes in behavior” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 72). Ginwright posited that trauma and the inability to heal from trauma directly correlate to poor academic success for at-risk youth.

From a critical lens of radical care, trauma is viewed as continuous in its effect on children or youth rather than a one-time occurrence as most experts describe traumatic events (Ginwright, 2010). Space that is provided in the classroom setting through a radical-care lens investigates the ongoing feeling left by the traumatizing event(s) as it disturbs the conscience of the youth and their ability to cope with public institutions and their own communities. In the framework of radical caring, “Caring relationships are not simply about trust,

dependence, and mutual expectations. Rather, they are political acts that encourage youth to heal from trauma by confronting injustice and oppression in their lives” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 56). To radically care for students, teachers themselves must intentionally make space in the class environment so that vulnerable student populations are recognized in meaningful ways. This recognition builds a capacity to act within the students, allowing an endogenous self-transformation that will ideally serve to help heal the wounds of trauma, overcome the shame associated with being a part of the trauma, and ultimately result in agency for the students in their communities and society at large (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008).

Politicized Teaching: Authentic Versus Aesthetic Care

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) reported on whom she qualified as exemplary and extraordinary African American women teachers to inform her research on teacher-student relationships. Beauboeuf-Lafontant identified characteristics of how the teachers chose to exhibit care for their student populations and the academic success of those students who were classified as at risk. Beauboeuf-Lafontant shared numerous accounts within existing research of how African American teachers have been strongly identified in the literature as providing authentic care to African American students. Care, as a method of teaching and engagement in the teacher-student relationship, is not limited to populations of students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds but is applicable to all

students in the class and school setting (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008). Although not readily named as such in the literature according to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, citing the work of Angela Valenzuela (1999), who looked at teacher attitudes and the academics of Mexican-immigrant and Mexican American students, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) used the following definition of authentic care to explain her research: authentic care is defined as caring for students by seeing them as valued members of the classroom and school environment and not limiting their cognitive growth based on their low stereotypical classification.

Authentic caregiving by teachers was highlighted in Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2008) research by how Valenzuela (1999) defined "aesthetic" care. Aesthetic care, in this instance, is when the teachers' value is not on the students but on the abilities, skills, and work displayed by the students toward academic endeavors. Extending the ideal of authentic care for African American female teachers, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) introduced a concept unique to this group, termed "politicized mothering" (p. 252). Politicized mothering as an intrinsic and overt characteristic of authentic care is defined as "their [teachers'] maternal approach to students, the political awareness that shapes such maternal concern and the trans historical and communal vision of social change that sustains their commitments to children" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, p. 252). Marva Collins exemplified politicized mothering, according to Beauboeuf-Lafontant. Collins was described as an African American female teacher who opened her own school out of annoyance at the lack of care given to at-risk students in Chicago. Over

the course of a couple of decades, Collins was credited by Beauboeuf-Lafontant with the ability to positively impact these students through connecting to them in a politicized mothering way. Mothering in this context is not to be confused with mothering as seen in the mother-child relationship.

With this form of mothering, the African American female teacher empowers her students by teaching them the tools to navigate the political world. These tools arm the students with the ability to confront the adversity from which they come, through engaging their ability to cognitively understand the adversity and ultimately act as change agents to positively transform the larger society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008). Teachers who exhibit politicized mothering as a form of authentic care do not act to protect children from harm but rather to prepare them for the economic, political, and social structures that work against them in the formation of their own political identity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008). By empowering students through politicized mothering, authentic care also empowers teachers by connecting the teacher-student relationship to the human struggle for dignity, justice, liberty, respect, and recognition (Rodriguez, 2012).

The role of teacher care is the key component that helps students achieve their dreams (Godin, 2012). Using positive and authentic care as the ecological culture of the classroom and school setting models to the students how to care about themselves, their community, and society as a whole. In short, Godin (2012) believed that in order to teach students “who can learn how to learn” (p. 18), teachers must first teach students how to care. Caring becomes the

bedrock of good teaching because once students care “enough about their dreams, they’ll care enough to develop the judgment, skill, and attitude to make them come true” (Godin, 2012, p. 33). Caring at this level does not come easily and is full of challenges to achievement. The teacher is not simply trying to “fix” the children or youth but to act as a nurturing and supportive agent of change in the children’s or youth’s lives.

Illuminating Students Through Acts of Recognition

Rodriguez (2008) viewed educational reform by way of policy and outcomes on the K-12 public schooling system and its impact on student achievement. This achievement is connected to how students internalize the relationships they participate in at school. Rodriguez concluded, “Relationships have been found to be inextricably linked to learning, especially when driven by care and respect” (p. 437). Equally important to positive relationships for students is the experience of negative student-adult relationships, especially for low-income and minority students who, according to Rodriguez, already exhibit high rates of dropping out and academic failure. Rodriguez examined teacher-student relationships involving urban high school students of color through the lens of recognition. Rodriguez situated recognition of students as a layered process in that “recognition is used as both a theoretical and empirical concept to illuminate students’ experiences and voices” (p. 436). Rodriguez’s study included nine 11th graders from large high schools. These student participants

were all ethnic minorities and low income. Rodriguez used grade point averages and Stanford 9 scores to qualify students' academic achievement as low, middle, or high.

Data collection and analysis included a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and survey data (Rodriguez, 2008). The interview questions were designed to establish how the students experienced relationships with adults in their school with a focus on social and cultural elements. School culture, viewed as the values and customs of a school, was relevant in assessing the value students placed on their learning environment (Wren, 1999). Rodriguez (2008) postulated, "One under-examined social and cultural feature of urban schooling is the impact student-adult relationships have on students' experiences in school" (p. 437). An important aspect of this article was Rodriguez's assertion that both teachers and students struggled to recognize their value and role as actors in the school and political world. Rodriguez also viewed recognition through the lens of authentic versus aesthetic care. Authentic and aesthetic care were introduced to Rodriguez by the work of Valenzuela (1999), who studied teacher attitudes and the academics of Mexican-immigrant and Mexican American students. Authentic care was conceptualized as the deep value teachers and other adults placed on marginalized students to build them up, because they were placed by their social conditions in schools that treated them as inferior (Rodriguez, 2008). Authentic care was juxtaposed with aesthetic care, defined by Valenzuela (1999) as when

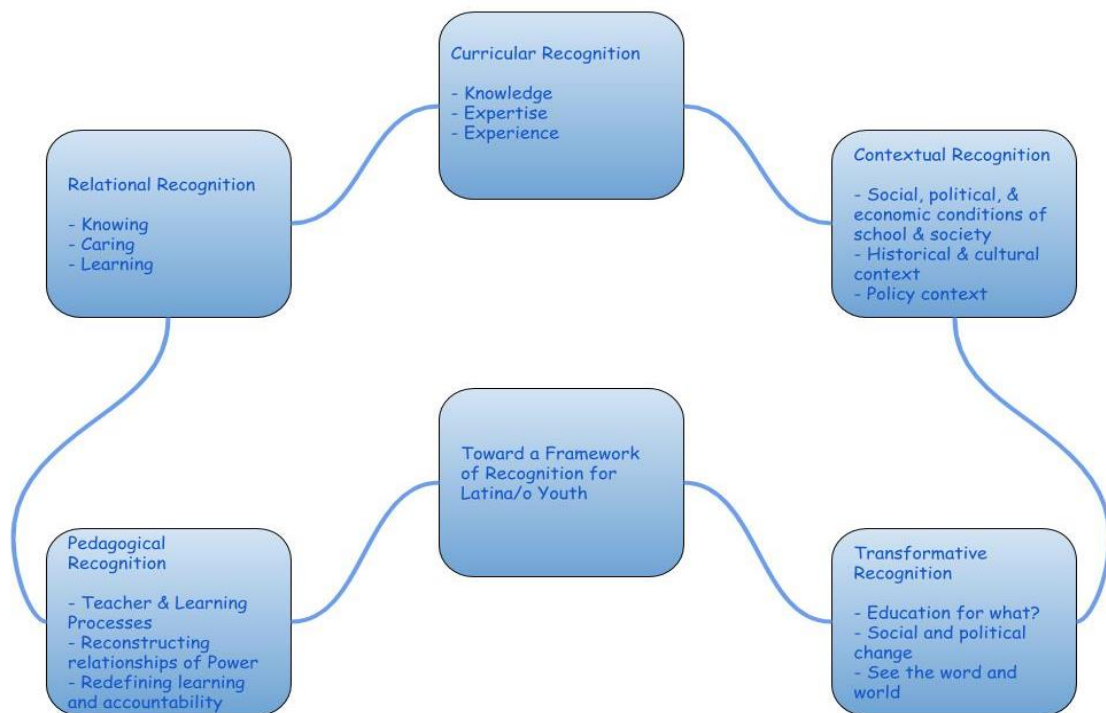
teachers' value is not on the students but on the abilities, skills, and work displayed by the students toward academic achievement.

Rodriguez (2008) too concluded with a summary of Valenzuela's (1999) work on authentic versus aesthetic care, indicating that, "Apathetic adults often expect academically and socially marginal students to care about school, when school adults themselves fail to relay authentic forms of caring to students" (p. 439). Recognition for the students by teachers and other adults in the school environment becomes the paramount feature for all students characterized as at risk. Recognition for students of color and those from low-income families is especially important, because while some students are recognized for their contribution to the schooling environment, these groups have historically not had their voices heard in meaningful ways that honor their existence and individuality in equivalent ways (Rodriguez, 2008). Recognizing students in the context of schooling means to "see" them by speaking with them regularly and by emphasizing their academic achievement and personal well-being (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Recognition of the students by the teachers and other adults in schools must be illustrated through setting goals and high expectations for students that challenge them to persevere in academic pursuits and through personal trials.

Expressing the need for educators to critically assess their relationships with students, Rodriguez (2012) proposed five methods of practice for those in education to undertake in K-12 schooling with students from marginalized

communities. Although this theory is situated around the Latina/o student, it is applicable to any marginalized student struggling to be seen and heard in the K-12 public school setting. Through this framework, “Recognition has the potential to challenge educators to reflect on the human side of policy compliance and institutional practices, particularly among practitioners and other stakeholders responsible for serving youth” (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 8). Educational conversations about students from marginalized communities are largely nonexistent as they relate to raising consciousness and positive identity for this vulnerable class of students (Franklin, 2013). Rodriguez (2012) identified this practice as a pedagogy of recognition and categorized it as follows: curricular recognition, contextualizing recognition, pedagogical recognition, transformative recognition, and, finally, relational recognition (see Figure 1).

Curricular recognition is framed as the ability of schools to affirm Latina/o students through content (Rodriguez, 2012). This lens of recognition seeks to describe the need for educators to position themselves as actors with agency who seek to incorporate and situate culturally relevant pedagogy by way of scholarly learning for the purpose of equalizing deficit-oriented ideologies about the historical contributions from people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). Rodriguez (2012) viewed this recognition as a necessity to affirm and validate the cultural contributions and experiences of marginalized students as they matriculate through the K-12 educational system.



*Figure 1. The five pedagogies of recognition for Latina/o youth. From “Everybody Grieves, but Still Nobody Sees’: Toward a Praxis of Recognition for Latina/o Students in U.S. Schools,” by L. F. Rodriguez, 2012, *Teachers College Record*, 114(1), p. 23.*

To promote knowledge in ways that have been historically denied through the contextualizing lens of recognition, educators extend the meaning of schooling beyond a strict classroom context to an understanding that seeks to explain external forces. These external forces are identified as political, social, and economic conditions that affect students’ ability to engage and have opportunities in society at large (Rodriguez, 2012).

Pedagogical recognition takes into consideration ways in which the educators can position themselves in the classroom as agents who intentionally seek opportunities to teach students how to advocate for themselves (Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). Pedagogical recognition also seeks to reconstruct the traditionally negative identities that have served to belittle, demean, and malign this population of students (Rodriguez, 2012). The fourth dynamic of recognition was identified by Rodriguez (2012) as the process of the teachers and educational system examining how the school setting can work in tandem with the larger society in recognition of the need to positively transform the lives of students. Through the transformative lens, marginalized students do not have their political or social identity limited to scores on a standardized test but instead are, “academically competitive to excel in challenging situations, and must be equipped with critical skills to connect their realities with the larger influences of school, community, and society for self-determination” (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 23).

Relational recognition is defined as the practice of educators to purposefully seek out ways to acknowledge their students through simple acts of humanity (Rodriguez, 2012). These gestures can include things such as greeting students at the door as they walk into a classroom or intentionally calling them by name and waving, when they are noticed around the school campus. Rodriguez (2012) believed that, “Educators who practice relational recognition acknowledge the significance of relationships in student engagement and achievement and are willing to enact the simple yet critical gestures of acknowledgement” (p. 16).

Relational recognition prompts educators to examine the context in which they “see” their at-promise students. Even before the teachers have become familiar with the students, assessments are made about the value of the students in their abilities and content of their character (Rodriguez, 2012), in effect reducing the students to the clothes that they wear or the manner in which they walk, talk, or style their hair.

Rodriguez (2012) told the story of a 19-year-old 11th grader he interviewed who craved recognition by a teacher through a simple comment of affirmation written on one of his assignments. It is hard to imagine that a student who was 19 years old and in the 11th grade had not received that basic sense of acknowledgement from one of his teachers over all of those years. Seeking to recognize the humanity and dignity owed these students in deliberate and meaningful ways should be the crux of school culture. It must not be assumed that teacher-student relationships are carried out in caring and purposeful ways that bring acceptance, consciousness, and promotion of positive self-identity for the at-promise students.

Framing: Students at Risk and Resilient

This review of the literature has focused on the relevance of positive teacher-student relationships through intentional and meaningful levels of care. However, understanding how those relationships are created and maintained and why it is critical to use the lens of radical care is most impactful when seeking to

engage students who have been identified as at risk of school failure. A first step is to shift the discourse that rationalizes the mindset of educational stakeholders who frame students from disadvantaged backgrounds by their potential risks of failure. Instead, these students must be thought of in terms of their potential promises of success. Harper and Quaye (2015) posited that educators are neglectful of students who are placed at risk for dropping out of school, when those educators do not make concerted efforts to engage and connect these students to the schools they attend. As noted previously in this literature review and using Johnson's (1997) definition, at-risk students have been identified in the context of public school education as children or youth who come from backgrounds situated in substance abuse, single-parent families, criminal activity, physical or mental abuse, ethnic minority status, low socioeconomic status, school truancy, school suspensions, and learning English as a second language.

There are a number of students who face one or more of the factors identified previously in this literature review as risks to academic success. The teachers and principals interviewed in Johnson's (1997) study were asked to detail their professional experiences with at-risk youth and report on various factors they believed allowed the students to achieve school success, despite their challenges. Schools were determined to service at-risk students if significant portions of their populations came from low-income families, their populations were heavily disproportionate in numbers of ethnic minority students,

or they had large transient student populations (removed from family due to sexual, physical, or emotional abuse), to name a few of the qualifying criteria. Johnson noted the participants in the study were not given specific requirements as to how to quantify resiliency, but the term was “loosely defined as those who are socially disadvantaged and who succeed” (p. 39). Johnson created a conceptual framework that, in her assessment, identified the compensatory factors that equated to at-risk students being identified as resilient by teachers or administrators.

Johnson’s (1997) framework consisted of the following: relationships, student characteristics, family factors, community factors, and school factors. The vast majority of responses related to relationships and student characteristics. The most frequent response participants cited as the key to resiliency in at-risk students was relationships. The relationships were defined as supportive, encouraging, and positive for the at-risk students, and they were observed in the areas of contact with adults on campus, peer groups, and older siblings. A few of the student characteristics that were identified by teachers and administrators interviewed that led to resiliency were good attitudes, work ethic, self-control, the ability to seek and accept help, and goal setting (Johnson, 1997).

Framing: At-Risk Students and Perceptions of Identity

Perumal (2006) pointed to the constant struggle of individuals to insert themselves into the political world by learning to self-advocate and transform

previous ways of thinking that have historically worked to marginalize or stigmatize the contributions of the group(s) with which they identify. In an educational context, Perumal demonstrated how identity politics were important in the lives of students, because they consisted of collective narratives that students used to mold perceptions of themselves in relation to school culture as well as to the larger society as members of the group(s) to which they belonged. Smyth and Hattam (2004), in their assertion on the importance of identity as part of the discourse around students who engaged in early school leaving, defined identity as “socially constructed, a ‘production’, which is never complete and always in process” (p. 97). There are myriad things that go into influencing the identity of all people. However, at-risk students’ perceptions of self are significantly shaped by their experiences in the schooling continuum. At-risk students viewed by the schooling system through a deficit-based lens find it harder to overcome their reticence and doubts and take measures to call on teachers and other adults in the school community, who are so perfectly situated in schools to assist them.

Muller (2001) examined how teachers’ and students’ perceptions of others’ investment in the teacher-student relationship contributed to the overall health of the relationship as well as the productivity of the students. Specifically, she assessed whether there was a link between the health of the relationship and the students’ academic health. Muller focused on at-risk students and, using the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) from 1988-1992 as the guide,

viewed mathematics test performance of 10th and 12th graders. Specifically, Muller cited the test's ability to yield data about teachers' assessment of student effort and teachers' expectations of students' futures. Muller wanted to see how resources were levied to advance the individuals' self-interests.

Muller (2001) relied heavily on Coleman's (1988) theoretical concept of social capital. Social capital in this analysis was a part of cultural and/or economic capital, and aspects of social structures such as trust, respect, and reciprocity were examples of the resources negotiated. At the center of this theory was the premise that in order for social capital to be generated, an investment had to be made by the actors in the relationship. The relationship also had to be undergirded with trust for the investment to yield a return (Muller, 2001). Scribner and Crow (2012) asserted, "Trust, by definition, influences one's willingness to take a risk in a relationship" (p. 267). As a resource in the negotiation of social capital, trust is a valued commodity. For some students who have lived or are currently living through trauma such as poverty, abuse, or abandonment, extending trust is an overwhelming thought and has to be carefully crafted between them and the person to whom they are extending that trust (Ginwright, 2010).

Muller's (2001) research demonstrated that the teacher-student relationship, as a resource of social capital for students, had implications for the academic achievement of the students as well. Complicit in the teacher-student relationship was the culture of the school environment. Muller's research

contended that a positive teacher-student relationship had the added value of the teacher perceiving the student as wanting to learn and succeed. This in turn increased the goodwill the teacher had toward the student and also increased the effort the teacher made for the student by way of investment in his or her academic outcomes. All students who were perceived by the teacher as not giving sufficient effort were less likely to have the teacher invest social capital in the relationship (Muller, 2001).

Muller (2001) highlighted the need of students to be valued and recognized in the classroom setting by their teachers in order to be engaged in learning. Muller found,

The emergence of social capital in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students may be related to the students' perceptions that the teacher will act in the best interests of the student; the amount at-risk students learn may depend on whether they perceive that teachers care. (pp. 250, 252)

It is important to note that the at-risk students are the ones who lose out when the teacher-student relationship fails, because the lack of investment typically leads to a lack of engagement and tilts the odds for the students toward failure. Therefore, how teachers as social actors view at-risk students as social actors does directly correlate to teacher expectations and the levels of care and trust they extend to their students (Muller, 2001).

Smyth and Hattam (2004) also conducted a longitudinal study of early school leavers in Australia. In all, 209 students categorized as at risk of early school leaving, school “leavers,” and those who were currently enrolled participated in the study. Smyth and Hattam sought to understand why students chose not to complete secondary education. Smyth and Hattam’s research also had global implications in its ability to connect student reasoning for early school leaving with how students viewed the intersections of their social, economic, and political identities. Socioeconomic standing was extremely prevalent as an early indicator of why several of the Australian students in the study did not complete all twelve years of schooling. Smyth and Hattam concluded that students simply did not hold a strong sense of identity about themselves as it related to their value in the school environment. Students who came from strong socioeconomic schools for the elite or well-off or even private-sector schools did not report early school leaving as a problem they encountered. Simply put, schooling, in its current form, did not work for students coming from socioeconomically challenged environments (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

Frymier and Gansneder (1989) conducted a cooperative project spanning 276 schools that included 22,000 students who were identified by their school counselors and classroom teachers as at risk for factors of school and/or life failure. Frymier and Gansneder’s research was guided by four distinct questions: “Which students are at risk? What are they like? What are the schools doing to help at-risk students? And how effective are these efforts?” (p. 142). A purpose

of this project was to establish an “at-riskness” scale to measure the individual students based on factors that previous research had identified as placing students at risk of school failure (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989, p. 142). There were a total of 45 factors included based on an account of previous literature described in the study. A few of these factors included depression, being sexually abused, suicidal, grade retention, and drug use. Teachers, counselors, and principals were interviewed or surveyed, and included in the information they were given were thirteen instructional strategies (for example, small class sizes, parent involvement, flexible scheduling, referral to a psychologist, referral to special education) as interventions to aid at-risk students (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989).

Frymier and Gansneder’s (1989) findings suggested that anywhere from 25%-35% of the students identified by school counselors and classroom teachers had multiple factors that qualified them as seriously at risk of school failure. A remarkable finding from this study was the data showing 90% of the teachers surveyed responded that it was the responsibility of parents and students to help at-risk youth deal with risk factors such as family instability, drug/alcohol abuse, and family discord. Based on their findings, Frymier and Gansneder surmised, “Educators confess to lack of skill with or confidence in many of the approaches to working with at risk students” (p. 145). This is not surprising, considering the lack of education and preparedness for dealing with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants were asked to name some strategies that the

classroom teachers could use to assist these students. Among the more frequent responses were to place a referral to special education and/or to the school psychologist (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989). The need to shift mindsets of those responsible for making decisions that impact the lives of at-risk students is made even more critical when it is acknowledged that deficit thinking has long shaped the programs and policies that have governed K-12 public education.

What is most clear is that identity and the role schools and educators play in the perceptions held, the labeling, and the identification of students has foundational implications on the students' development toward the adults they become. The labeling of children and youth as at risk has created a negative psychological vacuum for students as well as a negative psychological belief system about students coming from ethnic minority backgrounds and low-socioeconomic-status families (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). According to Sanders and Jordan (2013),

Unless we, as educators, begin to change the discourse, to deconstruct the insidious use and abuse of risk in education, and to empower parents, schools, and communities to be responsive to all students, we will continue to embrace a pervasive construct that potentially does more harm than good. (p. 65)

Estimating and forming probabilities about a student's risk of school failure fails to consider the factors that the school as a learning institution needs to take

into account when preparing for students who come from home and social environments that cause them to need more academic, social, and emotional support in the classroom and school setting (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). The onus is placed on the students to make up for or provide for their deficiencies as opposed to the teachers, school, or even the community at large. Recognizing the historical, societal, and economic conditions both inside of schools and in the political world is vital. It is critical to understand the factors that contribute to academic failures by students in traditional K-12 public education and still afford students from disadvantaged backgrounds the dignity to not have to overcome negative perceptions about who they are to become.

Framing: Students at Risk, Students at Promise

Franklin (2013) took a historical journey into how and why students have been labeled as at risk. This review of the literature is not only vital to understanding the epistemology associated with framing the discourse around specific student groups but also challenges the notion of students being identified as at risk versus seen for the potential for their success. Schools and communities can, “foster the development of all youth who should be considered more at-promise for school success than at-risk for school failure” (Franklin, 2013, p. 4). Despite seeing the need to target students who come from challenging backgrounds, Franklin posited that an accurate picture of students labeled as at risk must be painted not only by assessing the risk factors from the

environments that they come from but also through the critical interactions and spaces they share in social institutions such as schools. Franklin held that, “The notion of risk in education is relatively new but its widespread abuse and use to flag non-normative development, cultural deficits, and academic problems is old and uncomfortably familiar” (p. 3). The use of the very term *at risk* implies that the student enters the learning environment with deficient academic skills or abilities as well as maladaptive behavioral problems (Franklin, 2013).

By critically examining the entire environment that creates space for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in school settings, stakeholders in education are no longer forced to strictly view the risks and vulnerabilities of students; instead, teachers and educational policymakers can focus on the promise these students bring to the school system (Franklin, 2013). In order to critically provide for the needs of these students on a fundamental level, protective measures must be in place to combat predisposed risk factors. Schools, as ecological systems, must counteract the factors of risk by providing students with protective factors such as recognition, politicized mothering, and radical care that work to overcome or at least minimize the identified issues believed to challenge students’ possibilities for school success (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012). By providing an environment for students with protective factors built in through meaningful processes, educators position students to overcome the challenges that have

systematically worked against prior generations of students with shared characteristics.

Although negatively referring to students who come from contexts that place them at higher risks of not being successful in school or not completing compulsory K-12 education is harmful psychologically, the impact deficit thinking has on students in the educational and societal communities at large is even more damaging (Ginwright, 2010; Sanders & Jordan, 2013; Valencia, 2012). Thus, teacher discourse associated with this population of students is negatively affecting the perceptions, motivations, and social capital that educators are willing to negotiate with their at-risk students (Ginwright, 2010; Johnson, 1997; Muller, 2001; Sanders & Jordan, 2013). The ecological system of schools must radically care and recognize the transformative obligation teachers must hold for at-risk students (Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Peterson & Deal, 1998). All those invested in the success of students in the K-12 school system must be cognizant of the need to provide a culture where responsive care through teaching is a part of the ecological landscape for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Edmonds, 1979; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Limiting students who fall into categories based on factors mostly outside the scope of their control partially due to political, economic, or social conditions is irresponsible. Ginwright (2010) posited that many at-risk students face traumatizing events that further disadvantage them through the perpetuation of a

fixed mindset that refuses to acknowledge the humanity of children and youth identified as at risk. The decade-plus research of Dweck (2006) decoded the fixed mindset as it can relate to teacher-student relationships by simply giving accounts of teachers who have been successful with groups of students who traditionally underachieve. By harvesting the qualities of a growth mindset, teachers maximize their capacity to see students' abilities and skills as a work in progress, which, over time, can be grown with the right amount of authentic care, challenge, and stamina (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008). If the teachers' relationships with at-risk children and youth only amount to a discourse of critiquing what is wrong or feeling sorry for what is going on in the lives of these students, the students are being positioned to repeat the very risks that are being used to forebode and categorize their political identity within the school system. Tyack and Cuban (1995), in their analysis of public school reform, stated, "Change where it counts the most in the daily interactions of teachers and students is the hardest to achieve and the most important" (p. 10).

Changing the framing of this discourse will prove to be transformative to teachers' relationships with at-risk youth by allowing the teachers to define, describe, and experience positive and radical, recognized care with this group of children and youth. Teachers have to come to the school setting with a mindset that encourages them not to rest at giving at-risk students tools to survive their lives but instead reach beyond that and have a mindset of determination to give at-risk students the tools to transform their future life trajectories.

Harmful Effects of Deficit Thinking

Educators and policymakers alike have grappled with how to improve and best serve students who come from disadvantaged, low-income, and racial or ethnic minority communities (Valencia, 2012). It is the amalgamation of low teacher expectations, poorly financed schools, a lack of positive teacher-student relationships, and general student disengagement with the required curriculum that is the root cause of schools' failing these students (Valencia, 2012). Students of color who fall into these classifications have experienced secondary school dropout rates in excess of 50% in the American public K-12 school system (Rodriguez, 2008). Another staple to this way of thinking is the idea that the academic failures of students coming from these disadvantaged groups are of their own doing. This idea is known as deficit thinking, and at its center is "an endogenous theory—positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies" (Valencia, 2012, p. 2). Swadener (1995) posited, "It is important to consider where much of the current discussion in professional education circles and in the popular media locates the deficiencies or blame for the growing numbers of those considered at-risk for school failure and other problems" (p. 32). The deficit model postulates that these students lack the cognitive ability to fully achieve academically and, coupled with maladaptive behavior and a lack of motivation for learning, show little promise of being able to overcome deficiencies associated with the class, culture, or family to which they belong. This view serves to explain low

achievement by students from disadvantaged backgrounds by placing the onus for a lack of achievement on the disadvantaged students.

Other educational research has established a strong counterargument to deficit thinking by showcasing a historical perspective on what it means to be a marginalized student in the K-12 public education system (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). Alarming dropout rates at the secondary level still persist, and deficit thinking has done little to lessen the academic achievement divide for students identified as at risk of school failure in K-12 public school settings or to improve overall life trajectories measured as generational upward social and economic mobility (Rodriguez, 2008). The literature is replete with approaches to improving schooling for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet each paradigm comes with its own values and limits (Bartolome, 1994; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Edmonds, 1979; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Muller, 2001; Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995, 2005; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012; Valencia, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Education is more than the acquisition of knowledge. According to Santamaria and Santamaria (2012), “Education as a process of empowerment, and education as an emancipator means to enable citizens to make choices that influence their world” (p. 4). Deficit thinking, in some cases, has overtaken educational decision-makers, leaving low-income, racial and ethnic minority, and other students from marginalized communities in desperate need of immediate change.

Although a multitude of approaches exist to overcome deficit thinking, they fall short of across-the-board improvement, because they tend to be single-dimensioned (Bartolome, 1994; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Edmonds, 1979; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Muller, 2001; Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995, 2005; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Exiting deficit thinking means leaving a comfortable mindset that accepts the status quo for disadvantaged students. For educational leaders, recognizing and addressing their own established biases against students at risk of school failure means continually growing and shifting in perspective and practice that engages and advances the learning possibilities for these students, while systematically granting impunity to future generations in hopes that they cease to suffer from the same injustices (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012).

Benefits of a Growth Mindset

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) conducted an experiment in an attempt to discover whether teachers' expectations resulted in increased student achievement. Rosenthal and Jacobson told teachers that some of their students had been identified as exceptional learners based on the test results from the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition. Since the students did not actually take the test, Rosenthal and Jacobson were in essence examining the mindsets of the teachers and whether favorable expectations benefited students and, if so, to what extent. Over a one year span, the students in control and experimental

groups were administered IQ tests. The experiment took into account factors such as the students' gender, minority status, grade placement (lower grades of first through third; higher grades of fourth through sixth), and where school leaders had placed students according to their knowledge and learning; this placement was called tracking, and the students were categorized as fast (advanced learner), medium (average learner), or slow (below-average learner; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) findings showed gains on the IQ test between the pre- and post-tests for students in lower grades, while the students in the higher grades received little to no impact. This resulted in students from lower grades becoming marked as exceptional learners. A possible explanation for the large discrepancy between the grade levels was that teachers of higher grades were viewed by their administrators as less effective when compared to lower grade teachers. This seminal study again suggested that how teachers perceived their students' abilities had a profound impact on student achievement (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). However, as the literature presented up to this point has made evident, other factors such as radical care and school culture are also critical elements toward the achievement of students. After 20-plus years of research, Dweck (2006) released a groundbreaking study on mindsets. Ricci (2013) defined a mindset as "a set of personal beliefs and . . . a way of thinking that influences your behavior and attitude toward yourself and others" (p. 4). Mindsets are viewed as "mental models" that hold all of the beliefs, values,

assumptions, summations, and imagery concerning how individuals make sense of the world (Senge, 2013, p. 8). Mindsets shape the ideas of teachers on concepts ranging from knowledge to moral character and even the deep tacit and a priori expectations held about students.

Dweck (2006) conducted research primarily with school-aged children in an attempt to discover how they coped with failure. She presented the children with puzzles to piece together ranging from easy to difficult, and she posed questions to them to gauge what they were thinking during the process and tried to assess what they were feeling. Ultimately, she wanted to, “understand the kind of mindset that could turn a failure into a gift” (Dweck, 2006, p. 4). Dweck summarized in her research that the viewpoint that one had about oneself significantly impacted how one lived life. Dweck argued that mindsets fell into one of two categories: a fixed mindset, in which the belief is that human characteristics such as intelligence, personality, and skills are all predetermined or, as Dweck phrased it, “carved in stone” (p. 6); or a growth mindset, in which intelligence is believed to be something that can be developed through hard work, persistence, effort, and strong focus over time.

In sharing a personal experience from her childhood, Dweck (2006) illustrated why she had grown up with a fixed mindset for the majority of her life. She described in vivid detail her sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Wilson, seating the class in order based on their IQ scores. Only the students with the high IQs were allowed to participate in trusted class rituals, such as carrying the flag or sending

messages from the teacher to the principal. Dweck lamented that the experience taught her and her classmates to “look smart” (p. 6). Being smart consumed her to the point that school was not a place for joy or care. In this specific case, a few notable things about her experience emerged. First, there was a hidden curriculum being conveyed through the culture of the classroom that taught that smart people could be trusted and those who could not prove themselves could not be trusted (Anyon, 1980; Giroux, 1983; Wren, 1999). Dweck (2006) cited this experience and others as shaping who she was as a teacher and how she conveyed being “smart” as a value in her own classrooms with students. Second, by measuring how individuals look at things through the lens of mindsets, conclusions can be made about how a growth versus a fixed mindset is reflected in the lives of teachers and their relationships with students (Dweck, 2006).

What Dweck (2006) created in her work on mindset was a way of placing the everyday values set on things like knowledge and ability into a simple and realistic formula to equate how believing in a fixed or growth mindset impacts how people think. This is accomplished at an innate level that directly leads to the actions taken in life that ultimately not only govern the thoughts individuals tell themselves about themselves but also work to control their perceptions of other people. Mindsets also work to ensnare students into teachers’ views on who they are and what they are capable of accomplishing. Scribner and Crow (2012) defined ability as “specific ways in which a person is deemed competent

or expert in some area” (p. 268). This proves to be a useful way of looking at ability, because a student can be competent without being an expert. People have certain innate gifts. However, proficiency and competency are linked through practice, and in order for teachers to get a return on their investment in students from disadvantaged homes, there first must be an overwhelming belief that, despite the starting point, the at-risk students have the ability to improve and grow with hard work, practice, and continued support from the teachers (Senge, 2013). Edmonds (1979) demonstrated in his findings on poor urban schools that teachers in schools that were characterized as “improving” evaluated their students on the belief that they could master basic skills. The simple act of teachers having a growth mindset over a fixed mindset as it related to students’ abilities proved to be enough to change how those teachers viewed their students (Edmonds, 1979).

That belief carried over into how teachers reported on the abilities of those students, rating their abilities as high or achieving (Edmonds, 1979). In cases of declining schools, Edmonds (1979) noted that teachers’ beliefs about students’ abilities were projected as low, and therefore they did not believe the students would be able to attain basic skills. In deficit-based thinking, as discussed previously, educational leaders and policymakers do a disservice to at-risk youth, because they create allowances for educators to absolve themselves from the responsibility they hold in servicing students from diverse backgrounds (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). In order to form positive teacher-student

relationships with at-risk children and youth, educators must invest in a growth mindset so that trust, as a resource of social capital, is available as part of the relational exchange between teachers and students (Coleman, 1988; Muller, 2001).

In order to transform thinking that transforms learning for at-risk students in public school classrooms, schools and school districts have to work to become comfortable with the uncomfortable feeling of choosing to change their mindsets on what it means to fail (Bryk et al., 2015). It is possible to situate failing as something to be honored as a part of the learning continuum. Failure, as part of the educational process, must be an expected result, as long as the practice of failure takes place within a culture of improvement and the failure is viewed as a reflection of the students' attempts at learning and not a reflection of the students' abilities. This culture of learning to improve is only optimized when a growth mindset is applied.

Due to the myopic view of some educational reformers, public K-12 educational systems were forced to view failure as detrimental to students and the learning environment. A wave of accountability took root, and at every turn, schools were forced to measure their success not by the growth of their students from one stage of personal development to the next but rather by national norms that did not fully account for differences at the state, regional, or local level. According to Bryk et al. (2015), students did learn and accountability was measured; however, "When things do not go well, we have a propensity to look

for someone to blame. We fear that without personal accountability, people won't try their best to prevent failure the next time" (p. 179). Although the intent of accountability policies was undoubtedly well-meaning, the effect of the policies was to pit schools against schools, teachers against teachers, and teachers against students. In addition to failure now being personal, it also was tied to accolades, funding, and, for classroom teachers in most cases, a reflection of their professional ability (Bryk et al., 2015). By removing the option to risk failing, teachers also were faced with removing the option of risking trying.

How could teachers be expected to instill in their students an appreciation for risk taking that undoubtedly would lead to levels of failure, if they themselves were afraid to take educational risks in their classrooms? Risk taking aids students' learning, because it has the potential of failure. When the education system, through de facto and de jure policies, reinforced the fixed mindset, it also created an atmosphere of competition. That competition encouraged school districts, administrators, and teachers to self-assess and determine their own worth based on their students' achievement on standardized tests. Going about educational outcomes in this manner did not net sustainable change for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Simply forcing teachers into circumstances that pitted them against one another also pitted them against the students that most needed their compassion, belief, and hope (Ginwright, 2010; Lopez, 2013). Students who already are facing extraneous odds due to predispositions identifying them as at risk of school failure now have the extra stigma of being

deemed unteachable or, even worse, not worth the effort, because in the fixed mindset of educators and, by extension, the policies of the education system, these students have been measured and found lacking. Even worse, in the deficit-thinking model, the disadvantaged students are viewed as perverse due to coming from a circumstance that was beyond their ability to choose.

Once students are identified as at risk or coming from a disadvantaged background, deficit thinking kicks in and says these students cannot improve their skills or abilities. If teachers are valued as “good,” the mindset assumes that their talents should not be wasted on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Those students are reserved for the teachers, schools, or school districts that are incapable of improvement, written off for automatic failure, or, even worse, simply viewed as a placeholder until they too are reluctant participants in the reproduction of the disenfranchised cycle (Bryk et al., 2015; Godin, 2012). Santamaria and Santamaria (2012) conceded that although change is difficult, if reactionary to a stimulus, it has the strong result of leaving a person with deep feelings of resentment or powerlessness. Educators must choose to change from a fixed or deficit mindset to a growth mindset and form learning habitats that can forever positively alter the lives of students from disadvantaged circumstances (Godin, 2012; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). The growth mindset allows for social capital to be exercised between teachers and students. In this context, the cultural capital of the students as well as the teachers is legitimized and honored by viewing power as coequal between the

teachers and students (Coleman, 1988; Giroux, 1983). This allows the teachers to no longer serve as gatekeepers of knowledge but rather as partners in the learning community. Acknowledging the need to position teachers to have a growth mindset rather than a deficit mindset as it relates to students from disadvantaged communities allows for true relationship building wrought with trust and reciprocity to be experienced between teachers and students.

The literature is scant in providing a multidimensional approach to student achievement through teacher-student relationships. A mental shift must occur in teachers and policymakers if students from disadvantaged communities are going to be positioned for generational success. Using the Greek word *metanoia*, Senge (2013) described this kind of deep and fundamental shift in thinking as transformative and awakening. By connecting approaches already proving successful in educational literature, improvement of teacher-student relationships ultimately is key to positively impacting school success for students labeled as at risk of school failure.

The Importance of School Culture

The environment of a classroom or school is a crucial determinant of successful schooling. Organizational and institutional culture has been defined as the values and symbols that affect school environments (Wren, 1999). The culture of schools is one of the most elusive things to define yet is the most important piece of the schooling experience: "Culture influences everything that

goes on in schools” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 28). Peterson and Deal (1998) defined school culture as the underpinning current of all interaction that makes up the core values, ideas, customs, and socialization of all people within the school setting. Peterson and Deal also viewed culture as the informal set of guidelines that work behind the scenes to shape the school environment. As part of a study to understand school culture, Peterson and Deal interviewed staff members and visited hundreds of schools, both within the United States and abroad, over a twelve year span.

Peterson and Deal’s (1998) research unlocked the interlinking parts of school culture from how it is constructed to how it transitions over time. Peterson and Deal focused on toxic school cultures and identified school cultures that bred toxicity by having disgruntled staff, unclear directions from leadership, and teachers who were not student-centered. Toward the creation of a positive school culture, Peterson and Deal cited Joyce Elementary in Detroit, Michigan, as a school where “joy and caring fill the hallways” (p. 29). The construction of such a culture is not easy. However, there are key ingredients to the process that Peterson and Deal believed must be value-laden with a communicating and committed staff. In this context, the creation of a school culture with an emphasis on caring for students becomes the bedrock of successful schooling and is met with laughter, joy, and genuine concern for the ability of students to learn and become successful (Noddings, 2005).

Wren (1999) gave a historic account of the merging of two types of curriculum taught in schools, one being explicit while the other was identified as a “hidden or unwritten curriculum” (p. 593). Wren showed the historical basis that necessitated the role schools played as an extension of the greater society and the implicit teaching of whichever values and norms were embodied by a given era. Eventually, Wren settled on the final evolution of schools from using teachers as the promoters of values and symbols to the staff throughout the entire school environment acting as “socializing agents” (p. 594) for the overall development of students.

Hidden curriculum is the values, traditions, customs, expectations, and behaviors that are passed down from generation to generation (Wren, 1999). The hidden curriculum affects the daily operations of a school environment and has positive effects on those who are aware of it and, therefore, benefit from use of it. The hidden curriculum also works to entrap those who are unaware of it or do not readily contribute to a value system that does not take into account the values, traditions, customs, expectations, and behaviors that they bring to the school environment. The hidden curriculum in school culture, although subtle and not explicit, is deeply rooted in the everyday implicit operations of a school’s ecological system. Therefore, implicit hidden curriculum is as powerful as explicit curriculum and expectations taught within the culture of schools (Anyon, 1980; Wren, 1999). At times, a challenge to the hidden curriculum is a challenge to the status quo and, therefore, very daunting to undertake and change. However,

without a challenge to existing norms, customs, and values established by the hidden curriculum within the class and school setting, there will continually be educational inequities for students already marginalized in schools and coming from underserved communities, resulting in further alienation of disadvantaged students (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). The hidden curriculum is deeply embedded into the fabric of school environments (Anyon, 1980). Due to this reality, educators must be mindful of the hidden curriculum that exists in school cultures and work to ensure all students are valued, recognized, and accepted for the unique talents, gifts, abilities, values, and customs that they bring to the school environment (Anyon, 1980; Rodriguez, 2008).

Edmonds (1979) pointed to the inequality of the schooling system as it pertained to the work of teaching poor public school children. He explained, “Education in this context refers to early acquisition of those basic school skills that assure pupils successful access to the next level of schooling” (Edmonds, 1979, p. 15). Teachers are responsible for the delivery of skills to their students, referred to as knowledge. That process can be thwarted, intentionally or unintentionally, by the culture of the classroom or school. Edmonds’s research cited the efforts of school leaders in poor urban schools who created school environments steeped in a value system of high expectations for student achievement and an overall atmosphere that all people in the school found enjoyable. To gain this level of success in modern-day schooling, classrooms and schools must improve, and that improvement will only occur through change

(Bryk et al., 2015). Edmonds (1979) cited a 1974 State of New York Office of Education Performance Review study of two inner-city schools, one high achieving and the other low achieving, with a commonality of both servicing poor urban school children. Edmonds highlighted how deficit-based thinking created school environments that were not conducive to learning for students from disadvantaged backgrounds:

Many professional personnel in the less effective school attributed children's reading problems to non-school factors and were pessimistic about their ability to have an impact, creating an environment in which children failed because they were not expected to succeed. (p. 17)

Bryk et al. (2015) reported on evidence provided by cognitive scientists who discovered that when human beings struggle or face setbacks, their learning actually deepens. Unfortunately, because from the early stages of life people are taught to only value their successes, they often miss out on the chance to embrace failures as part of the unavoidable evidence that learning and, therefore, improvement is indeed occurring. Edmonds (1979) further exposed with his findings that a fixed mindset does not accept failure as part of the learning environment. A fixed mindset obliges classroom teachers to create cultural ecological classroom systems that view certain students as presupposed for school failure. Therefore, teachers believe these students are not worth the extra time and energy it takes to build their skills or enhance their abilities

(Dweck, 2006; Ricci, 2013). Anyon (1980) situated this phenomenon as a direct causality of the hidden curriculum found in schools.

Bartolome (1994) sought to review classroom cultures teachers created through the methods used to interact with students labeled as at risk or disadvantaged. As a self-identified Chicana and professor of teacher preparatory courses dealing with the multicultural classroom, Bartolome observed “students who are anxious to learn the latest teaching methods” (p. 174). However, in dealing with at-risk/disadvantaged students, Bartolome advanced the argument that these students are reflections of societal roots steeped in oppressive and unequal treatment, which manifests itself within the cultural environment of public schools. Bartolome relied on research that debunked the traditional ideas that there is a universal teaching strategy that can serve as the elixir in the classroom setting.

Bartolome (1994) challenged teachers to become politically minded in recognizing how traditional cultures within schools have served to dishonor at-risk students by not valuing how they are products of the larger society that, generation after generation, has constituted them as a devalued population (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012). Bartolome (1994) held that “teaching is not a politically neutral undertaking . . . educational institutions are socializing institutions that mirror the greater society’s culture, values, and norms” (p. 178). As previously noted, this form of learning is passed down generationally and acts as a barrier to success for students who cannot

gain access to the established norms and traditions, which are automatically granted to other students who do not fall into the categories of at risk or disadvantaged in the public school setting (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008). Bartolome (1994) also cautioned teachers to be mindful of the perceptions (which are a part of the hidden curriculum in schools) held about students who come from a low socioeconomic status or belong to disadvantaged populations classified by race or ethnicity (Anyon, 1980; Wren, 1999).

Citing the work of Kathryn Hu-Pei Au (1979, 1980), Bartolome (1994) noted that native Hawaiian students were the source of conversations by school leaders to determine why their achievement lagged behind that of other nonnative students. Bartolome reviewed the Kamehameha Education Project, which was a reading program for native Hawaiian students with low academic achievement. Bartolome also cited the observations of researchers for the project, who said these children were “bright and capable learners; however, their behavior in the classroom signaled communication difficulties between them and their non-Hawaiian teachers” (p. 177). Bartolome (1994) utilized Hu-Pei Au’s study to articulate the importance of creating space in the classroom and school environment through recognition of the values, customs, and traditions students hold as part of their cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rodriguez, 2008). Bartolome (1994) went on to state,

She [Hu-Pei Au] found that the children’s preferred language style in the classroom was linked to a practice used by adults in their homes and

community called “talk story.” She discusses the talk story phenomenon and describes it as a major speech event in the Hawaiian community, where individuals speak almost simultaneously and where little attention is given to turn taking. Au explains that this practice may inhibit students from speaking out as individuals because of their familiarity with and preference for simultaneous group discussion. Because the non-Hawaiian teachers were unfamiliar with talk story and failed to recognize its value, much class time was spent either silencing the children or prodding unwilling individuals to speak. (p. 184)

The point Bartolome (1994) made about this fascinating phenomenon of “talk story” was that teachers must also familiarize themselves with the norms and values that students bring into the classroom and school environment in order to see their humanity, recognize their dignity, and respect their contribution to the greater school or classroom culture (Anyon, 1980; Pianta, 1999; Rodriguez, 2012; Wren, 1999). It is critical that educators are encouraged to include culturally relevant pedagogical strategies in an effort to connect and value the experiences of their students in such a way that they feel like valued members of the school’s culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers offer space for their students in the learning environment through providing “a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). One such example given by Ladson-Billings (1995) was a teacher who, while teaching poetry, used

rap lyrics instead of traditional poetic elements to allow students who were more familiar with that genre to showcase their skill and ability. The teacher later went on to teach conventional poetry, but the students were able to see aspects of their valued cultural experiences outside of the school setting honored as part of their classroom learning experience (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The complexities and intricacies that work in tandem to provide the ecological systems of schools for students who experience them are part of an arduous process. In 2013, the state of California's policymakers, along with Governor Jerry Brown, worked to craft groundbreaking legislation that required schools to fully account for students who fell into categories of student populations who have historically struggled in areas of academic achievement, school connectedness, and school readiness (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). These students were classified as English language learners, foster care youth, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cabral & Chu, 2013). In focusing on these subpopulations and connecting state funding to how school districts plan and target services for their academic achievement, policymakers, through legislation, are making a radical effort to bridge the gap of low student achievement, high dropout rates in secondary schools, and school connectedness by recognizing and prioritizing students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds as seen with at-risk youth (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Moving toward a school environment that disables the divisiveness of hidden curriculum and seeks to connect all students to the learning environment is

feasible. As Edmonds (1979) observed, “There has never been a time in the life of the American public school when we have not known all we needed to in order to teach all those whom we chose to teach” (p. 20). Educational stakeholders only need to stand up and demand action to ensure inclusivity as a prominent feature of the school culture, especially as it pertains to at-risk children and youth.

Local Control and Accountability Plan

The state of California is responsible for meeting the educational needs of one in eight students in the United States (Lieberman & Miller, 2013). Within this population are high concentrations of multiethnic and multiracial groups that stem from at least 50 different immigrant groups and speak as many languages (Lieberman & Miller, 2013). Although this growth has continually changed and challenged the complexity of education for the state, there are three main turning points that culminated in a downward spiral for K-12 public education: the challenge to spending inequities between school districts in the case of *Serrano v. Priest*, legislation that severely weakened the state’s ability to fund schools through property taxes due to the passage of Proposition 13, and the passage of Proposition 227, which had the effect of ending bilingual education in the state (Lieberman & Miller, 2013). Combined, these propositions, when enacted, added to the depletion of an already reduced amount of resources the state was able to use to service students stemming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Cuts to school funding were felt most deeply by students from disadvantaged homes who desperately needed the support services school districts provided. In 2013, California Governor Brown called for sweeping reform in education through school finance by handing power back to local school districts to make decisions based on the needs of students (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Through the LCAP, school districts are charged with engaging stakeholders, who are defined as parents, certificated and classified union workers, community members, students, the school board, and school district leadership, to establish and set forth short- and long-term goals that match local needs and fulfill state educational priorities (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). California policymakers, through this legislation, are making a bold declaration about their desire to address the needs of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The statute consists of three levels of funding, known as base funding, supplemental funding, and concentration funding (Cabral & Chu, 2013). The allotment of these resources to school districts is then based on student demographics. Each district receives a per-pupil base grant, which is used to secure all district operational costs. Depending on the grade span (Grades K-3, 4-6, 7-8, or 9-13), the dollar amounts allocated by the state will vary due to the expected differential costs of educating students at specific junctures of the schooling process.

Specifically, Vasquez Heilig et al. (2014) noted that the supplemental grant is equivalent to 35% of the base grant and is allocated exclusively to assist

English language learners, children and youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and foster care youth. It is designed to assist districts with the assumed higher cost of educating students with various learning needs who come from these challenging backgrounds. Through the concentration grant, additional money is granted to school districts that demonstrate a high concentration (at least 50%) of the overall student population from any one of the aforementioned three categories (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Previous state and federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have effectively identified the need for school districts to address student achievement through accountability measures and, even more, have detailed subgroups of student populations, such as English language learners and low-income students, who have historically proven to significantly underperform on academic accountability testing measures (Rodriguez, 2008). The state of California classifies students as English language learners, low-income students, or foster care youth by the criteria in Table 1.

Keeping this formula in mind, a school district's LCAP must spell out the district goals for all students and the goals for qualifying special populations of low-income students, English language learners, and foster care youth (Cabral & Chu, 2013). To ensure transparency, Cabral and Chu (2013) highlighted the requirement for school districts to produce an LCAP that specifically details how they plan to address the state's eight priorities defined as the dominant factors in producing a top performing educational program (see Table 2).

Table 1

Classifications Under the Local Control Funding Formula

| Classification | Description |
|---------------------------------|--|
| English language learners (ELL) | ELL based on a home language survey and the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). If a parent or guardian reports on the home language survey that a language other than English is the student's initial language learned or the primary language used at home, the student is required to take the CELDT. If the student is determined by the school district not to be English proficient based on CELDT results, then the student is classified as ELL. Each year thereafter, an ELL student is reassessed using the CELDT. |
| Low-income (LI) students | LI students are those who qualify for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM). Eligibility for the FRPM is determined by school districts through a variety of means. In many cases, students are determined FRPM-eligible through an application process sent to students' households. If a household's income is below 185 percent of the federal poverty line (43,568 for a family of four), the student is eligible for FRPM. In other cases, students are directly certified as FRPM-eligible due to participation in other social service programs. |
| Foster care youth | Foster youth automatically are eligible for FRPM. Therefore, the foster family's income has no bearing on the foster student's FRPM eligibility. |

Note. Adapted from *Updated: An Overview of the Local Control Funding Formula*, by E. Cabral and C. Chu, 2013, p. 4, retrieved from Legislative Analyst's Office website: <http://lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.pdf>.

Table 2

Eight State Priorities for California

| Priority | Assessment |
|---|---|
| Student achievement | Measured in part by performance on standardized tests and ELL reclassification rates, percentage of students who are college and career ready |
| Student engagement | Measured in part by school attendance rates, middle and high school dropout rates |
| Other student outcomes | Measured in part by other student performance indicators and performance on exams |
| School climate | Measured in part by student suspension and expulsion rates |
| Parental involvement | Measured in part by attempts to seek parent input |
| Basic services | Measured in part by working order of facilities and students' access to standards-aligned resources |
| Implementation of Common Core State Standards | Measured by the implementation of state standards |
| Course access | Measured by student enrollment and access to course materials |

Note. Adapted from *Updated: An Overview of the Local Control Funding Formula*, by E. Cabral and C. Chu, 2013, p. 12, retrieved from Legislative Analyst's Office website: <http://lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.pdf>.

Governor Brown and California State legislators, through the LCFF and LCAP process, have prioritized not only what local school districts must account for in student learning but also how educators will do it through the environment they provide. Students' learning conditions stem from the culture that has been established by school leaders and especially the classroom teachers; therefore, as seen in the language provided by the LCAP, relying on curriculum and content alone does not meet the demands or needs of today's learners.

Summary

The teacher-student relationship is multidimensional and fluid (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002). The review of the literature focused on an already complex dynamic of teacher-student relationships by emphasizing the importance of the teachers' relationships (Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002) with students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Muller, 2001; Noblit et al., 1995). The research connected the important role teachers play in student achievement, student success, and long-term student life trajectories through the relationships they build with their students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Johnson, 1997; Muller, 2001). The review of literature examined teacher mindset and its effect on relationships with at-risk students (Dweck, 2006; Valencia, 2012). Deficit thinking has not served to strengthen teacher-student relationships but instead has had detrimental outcomes resulting in high student dropout rates at the secondary school level, a

lack of student engagement, and overall feelings of disconnect for at-risk children and youth in their struggle to be seen and recognized by educational leaders in the school setting (Bartolome, 1994; Rodriguez, 2008, 2012; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012; Valencia, 2012).

The literature reiterated that teachers and other educational leaders in the public school setting cannot control which students enroll at their school sites. Other uncontrollable factors include how grade proficient students are; if they come from traumatic home experiences marred with violence; if they come from families designated as low income or impoverished; if they belong to homes with sexual, mental, or physical abuse; and immutable student characteristics of race and gender (Ginwright, 2010). The only thing teachers, as educational leaders in K-12 public education, have complete control over is the environment they create in their classrooms (Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The classroom environment must be conducive to the learning and growth of disadvantaged students (Bryk et al., 2015; Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998) or remain a place where students' hopes and dreams die (Godin, 2012; Lopez, 2013). The role teachers play in the lives of students is vital. Teachers must leverage themselves in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with their students (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). This is one of the most important dynamics the children or youth may ever experience. The formula of success must be the people work over the paperwork. Accountability measures imposed by the state and federal government prescribing how schools should prepare students at key

points along the schooling continuum (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014) are of little consequence if educational leaders fail to grapple with the reality that students do not care what they are being taught until they know that they are first being cared for (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Ginwright, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muller, 2001; Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995, 2005; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

There is a benevolent belief held by society that teachers, due to their chosen profession, forge caring and positive relationships with the children and youth under their charge (Noddings, 1995; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2008). In addition, the most vulnerable of student populations within schools, pre-identified as needing extra support due to extraneous circumstances that place them at risk of school failure, are often the ones who most need strong and positive relationships with teachers and other adults in the school community. The political, economic, and social challenges faced by disadvantaged children and youth are usually beyond the control of the students and are seen as potential barriers to their school success (Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010).

The scholarly literature documenting the amount of care and recognition that is put forth by teachers in cementing strong and positive relationships with students at the secondary level is a noteworthy phenomenon. The objective of this study was to add to the body of research on teacher-student relationships by examining how secondary teachers in a middle school setting described their experiences in building relationships with students identified as at promise.

Chapter Three provides the explanation of the research approach used for this study. It describes the setting, population, participants, instrumentation,

validity, and trustworthiness procedures involved with this study. This chapter also includes the methods used to collect and analyze the data.

Research Design

Choosing an appropriate research methodology is vital in all forms of research. In qualitative research, researchers endeavor to investigate how individuals or groups apply meaning to a human or social problem (Creswell, 2013). A key objective of the researcher in qualitative research is to ascribe meaning to the phenomenon studied by using the voices and lived experiences of the individuals or group being studied. Phenomenology is often described as the philosophical approach to the study of experience (Giorgi, 1997). Moustakas (1994) defined a phenomenological research method as “a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Creswell (2013) further added that a phenomenological study focuses on “understanding the lived experiences of individuals around a phenomenon, such as how individuals represent their illnesses. Furthermore, individuals are selected who have experienced the phenomenon, and they are asked to provide data, often through interviews” (p. 122). Although not the first to use the term, Edmund Husserl is credited with developing the phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology has deep philosophical connections (Giorgi, 1997). More specifically, this research study utilized a form of phenomenology known as transcendental phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon through the analysis of text or language (Moustakas, 1994). In transcendental phenomenology, also known as descriptive phenomenology, the focus is on the participants' lived experiences and how the participants create meaning from the phenomenon being studied (Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1913/2012) advanced the notion of studying the world through the consciousness of individuals and not just the natural world. This distinction is critical to phenomenological research because insight is not gained or analyzed through the traditional form of gathering large amounts of data that are sifted with the scientific method. Instead, insight emerges from the experiences of individuals and groups and then is documented through the phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994).

This research study primarily drew from Moustakas's (1994) assessment detailing core aspects of phenomenological research. Citing Husserl (1913/2012), Moustakas (1994) emphasized a philosophical perspective of phenomenology rooted in the epoche. The epoche requires the investigator to "bracket" or set aside personal experiences as much as possible in order to see the phenomenon experienced through the freshness and uniqueness of the

participants' viewpoints (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1913/2012; Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) admitted that determining reality in a pure form is rarely accomplished; however, by first describing the experiences of the researcher with the phenomenon and then bracketing those views, it is possible for the researcher to accurately describe the lived experiences of those participants being studied (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1913/2012). In this transcendental phenomenological study, the phenomenon investigated was how secondary teachers in a middle school setting described their experiences of building relationships with students identified as at promise.

A secondary public middle school setting was the focus of this study, with the study participants being three teachers at the school. The intent of this study was to understand the essence of the lived experiences of teachers as they described building relationships with at-promise youth. A transcendental phenomenological approach was the ideal method for this research study, because it allowed me to describe what was experienced by teachers using their own words as well as how the teachers interpreted their lived experiences with at-promise students (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Setting

In qualitative research, researchers often concentrate on collecting data in the location where the phenomenon occurs to help capture the experiences of

the participants as the action or problem occurs (Creswell, 2013, 2014). This study was conducted in a school district within Southern California. The K-12 school district as a whole was responsible for the education of roughly 9,000 students as of October 2016. The study was conducted at a middle school that served approximately 1,000 students. This school was in compliance with 2013 state of California legislation establishing school funding, known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), and received basic grant funding as well as supplemental funding as outlined in Chapter Two of this study. It is important to note compliance with state law, because part of the definition for at-risk/disadvantaged children and youth that this study utilized included the state's three subgroups of foster care youth, low-income students, and English language learners. The school district had a diverse student population that included English language learners, low-income students, and a small percentage of foster care youth. The actual population of students who qualified under the definition of low income was based on the state's guidelines that assess households that fall below the federal poverty line. Matching specific students to qualifying low-income homes is protected information; therefore, the names of actual students and families who met the classification were not disaggregated in this study by the specific school site.

The low-income student population of the school district represented 55% of the district's total population. This percentage represented the highest number of students in any subgroup and showed that just over one out of every two

students in the school district qualified as a low-income student or came from a family that was considered low income by federal guidelines. The English language learner student population of the school district represented 10% of the district's total population. This equated to approximately 1,000 English language learner students, or one out of every ten students designated as an English language learner. This was the second highest number of students out of the state's three identified student subgroups. Foster care youth represented the lowest population of the student subgroups identified by the state and this study as an at-risk/ disadvantaged population. Tracking foster care youth is relatively new for school districts and emerged from the state of California's 2013 school reform legislation (Cabral & Chu, 2013). At the time of this study, 96 students were identified as foster care youth, representing 1.05% of the school district's total student population. Overall, approximately half of all students met criteria to be identified by the state of California and in educational literature as at risk/disadvantaged.

Research Sample

In qualitative research, the population of a study is summarized as the individuals of a characteristic-sharing group (Creswell, 2014). The sampling of the population is important in research and is a smaller version of the population (Creswell, 2012). I used purposeful sampling in the selection of research participants for this phenomenological study. It is critical that all participants

share in the phenomenon being studied in a phenomenological study.

Purposeful sampling is used to inform an understanding of the problem under study (Creswell, 2013). In purposeful sampling, participants, culture-sharing groups, and sites for study are purposefully selected because of their respective abilities to inform the researcher about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). In addition, Creswell (2013) stated that it is important to be aware that sampling can change through the process of the study; therefore, I was mindful of how new knowledge gained may have implications for the study. For this study, I employed maximum variation sampling, a popular sampling strategy in qualitative research. In this sampling strategy, the researcher selects distinguishing criteria for the selection of participants (Creswell, 2013). Creswell stated, “This approach is often selected because when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research” (p. 157). Inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

1. Participants had students classified as English language learners, foster care youth, or low-income students.
2. The participants practiced building positive relationships with the students they served. This was determined based on my observations of the teachers in addition to the comments made by students to me about their experiences in select teachers’ classrooms.

3. Each teacher had at least 2 years of classroom teaching experience in a secondary school setting.

Teachers who met the inclusion criteria were chosen to participate in this study. In part, teachers were chosen based on my personal experience and knowledge of the teachers' experience working with students who were considered at promise/disadvantaged as defined by educational research (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Franklin, 2013; Johnson, 1997). I used purposeful sampling to identify potential participants based on their personal knowledge and experience with school site administration and counselors as well as my own experience as a colleague of the teachers within the middle school. Once the participants were established, each was required to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix A).

Data Collection

Participant Recruitment

As part of the IRB process at California State University, San Bernardino, I contacted the proper authorizing agents of the school district to gain permission to conduct the study at one of the middle schools in the district. After receiving approval from California State University, San Bernardino's IRB (see Appendix B), I worked with the school site principal, counselor, and school registrar to determine where there were concentrations of students identified as low income, English language learners, or foster care youth. Next, I created a list of teachers

who taught students categorized in educational research as at promise/ disadvantaged. A recruitment letter including my contact information was hand delivered to the identified teachers asking for their participation in the study.

I then sent an e-mail to each of the three teachers contacted that included a description of the study, the purpose of the study, procedures of the study, participatory expectations of the study, and assurance that all data collected for use in the study would remain confidential. Further clarification was made that participation in the study was voluntary and that the prospective participants could withdraw their participation at any time during the study in accordance with California State University, San Bernardino's IRB protocol. Attached to the e-mail was the informed consent form for the prospective participants to sign and return to me acknowledging their agreement to participate. Once I received the signed consent forms from the participants, the research study began.

In qualitative research, the researcher collects data through document examinations, behavioral observations, and participant interviews (Creswell, 2013). The instrumentation used to collect data for this qualitative phenomenological study was semi-structured interviews. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) stated the act of interviewing "provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives" (p. 3). Data were collected via face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews. In phenomenological research, interview questions are guided by two broad, open-ended research questions regarding the participants' experience with the

phenomenon and how the participants have been influenced by the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). According to Holstein and Gubrium (2003), interviews are an interactional occurrence in which the interviewer arranges a conversation between the two parties that allows the interviewer access to the settings and lived experiences of the interviewee to which the interviewer may otherwise not have access.

Holstein and Gubrium (2003) noted that there is a long history of interpersonal actions reminiscent of an interview-type style in society. This is seen in everyday life for purposes of gaining immediate and practical knowledge (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). I conducted a 40- to 60-minute interview with each participant that was recorded on a digital audio recorder. I took copious notes during the interview process. According to Seidman (2013), “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). In transcendental phenomenological research, interview questions are open-ended in order to understand the lived experiences of the participants to capture their essence. Transcendental phenomenological research requires the researcher to purposefully set aside all personal experiences, biases, and preconceived notions about the phenomenon being studied as part of the data collection process (Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing, or *epoche*, as referred to by Moustakas (1994), is accomplished in three ways: (a) personal biases, experiences, and past

knowledge are written down before interviews about the phenomenon occur; (b) extensive memos are kept during the interview process to make special note of any bias in the mind of the researcher throughout the entire research process; and (c) a final collection of all “bracketed” information that was written down is added to the study for the readers to consider the researcher’s biases as they interpret results presented in the research study. In a transcendental phenomenological study, the researcher is responsible for setting a relaxed and comfortable environment for the participants so that the interviewees will speak openly and honestly (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, the participants were given the option of participating in the interviews during, before, or after school hours or over the course of their lunch hour, whichever was most convenient for them. Each of the participants elected to meet in his or her classroom after school hours.

The digital audio recorder remained in a locked desk when on site where the interviews were conducted. When transported to my home, the recorder was secured in my personal backpack; then, it was placed in a locked drawer at my home. Participants were offered the opportunity to listen to the recording at the end of their interviews, and all three declined. After transcribing the interviews, I deleted the audio recordings, maintaining only the transcriptions as the official record. Participants were verbally informed that I had made a copy of the transcriptions, and they were available for review at the participants’ request. I maintained these transcriptions, and if the participants requested, they were

allowed to view them at any time to check for accuracy. The participants did not request a copy of the transcripts. I stored the transcripts digitally on a password-protected word-processing program and in a locked cabinet.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative researchers tend to collect data at the site or in the location where the phenomenon is being examined (Creswell, 2013). Ethical issues are a concern in all forms of research. It is important to conduct research studies in such a way that the findings are not discounted due to a lack of ethical considerations. Ethical issues must be accounted for and addressed in the planning and designing of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In the planning and design stages of this phenomenological study, I made an ethical assessment of my role as an insider-researcher, serving as both a researcher for the study and a colleague of the participants. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) listed three separate advantages to being an insider-researcher, and each item identified provided rationale as to why the advantages of being an insider-researcher to a culture-sharing group outweighed the supposed negative assumptions.

The three advantages to being an insider-researcher identified by Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) were as follows: (a) the ability to have a greater understanding of the culture shared by the group being studied; (b) the benefit of having a pre-existing relationship that affords the researcher a higher sense of trust, truth-telling, and validity among the research participants; and (c) the avoidance of a disruption to the natural environment of the research participants,

which allows for the natural social interaction to continue without a heightened sense of being alarmed or stressed due to the nature and circumstance of an unknown investigator. Although there were clear and distinct advantages to being an insider-researcher, I was aware of the natural state of bias during the research process. However, I believe that the design of this transcendental phenomenological study, which allowed the research participants to share their experiences through semi-structured interviews and to verify the information collected in such a way that both my bias and that of the participants was managed, ensured that the purpose and comprehensive experiences of the participating teachers were accurately and robustly developed in this study.

Data Analysis

Unlike in other approaches involving qualitative research, transcendental phenomenological data are analyzed in specific forms (Creswell, 2013).

Analyzing phenomenological data is difficult due to the amount of data collected from in-depth interviewing and the need for the researcher to bracket data (Moustakas, 1994). Removing bias is essential in phenomenological research according to Moustakas (1994), who provided a detailed review of several phenomenological analytical methods. For this study, I utilized the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as described by Moustakas, which involves the following steps:

1. horizontalization,

2. significant statements,
3. similar significant statements,
4. significant statements using clusters,
5. textual description, and
6. structural description.

After all interviews were transcribed, data were analyzed and synthesized using horizontalization. In horizontalization, every statement made by the participants was given equal value (Moustakas, 1994). The significant statements identified during the horizontalization process were pulled from the transcripts to describe elements of the phenomenon experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Significant quotes or statements made by the participants that described their experiences with the phenomenon were matched with all other significant statements and quotes and were grouped into different clusters of meaning. I utilized the clustered groups of significant statements to describe what the participants experienced. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as textual description. The next step in the analysis of the data was to create a structural description, also known as imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). In imaginative variation, descriptions of how the participants experienced the phenomenon were recorded with close attention paid to the varied possible meanings, the varied perspectives of the participants, the various roles of the participants in relation to the meanings, and how the participants understood the context and setting around the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). A final step in

Moustakas's analytical method was for the researcher to write a description of the phenomenon that captured its essence or invariant structure and was based on the structural and textual descriptions. I then reported on my own experiences with the phenomenon, including the context and the setting as critical features.

The data were organized using the bracketed notes and observations I made during the interview process. An in-depth examination considered why participants responded the way they did and why I had the thoughts and feelings that arose about the comments, statements, or interactions with the participants throughout the interview and bracketing process. By hand, I reviewed data and identified, coded, and themed the information gathered from the interview transcriptions. I created data sets, organized all information by themes, and highlighted important information.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Validity in qualitative research was summed up by Maxwell (2009) as consideration toward the reasonability of conclusions and/or results made at the end of the study being wrong. Much like data collection and analysis in phenomenological research, validity and trustworthiness in a phenomenological study are measured by their own standards. Moustakas (1994) stated, "Scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meaning and essences

of experience” (p. 84). Validity, according to Creswell (2013), seeks to confirm that the study was well-supported and grounded. Husserl (1913/2012) espoused the phenomenological method as its own type of distinct and rigorous science based on a conscious and not naturalist perspective where everything was thought to belong to the world. Therefore, results, in the context of a transcendental phenomenological study, are thought trustworthy and valid as long as the study followed the phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1997; Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994).

A first step in checking validity, according to Hycner (1985), involves the participants themselves. Participants in transcendental phenomenological research validate their own experiences in the study; therefore, they decide if the findings are valid in their own view (Hycner, 1985). Furthermore, the researcher validates the findings based on what Husserl (1913/2012) defined as intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity, according to Husserl, is the ability of the researcher to be empathetic with the research participants, seeing their experience with the phenomenon as connected to their own different experiences. However, there are noted threats to validity in qualitative studies, and these must be accounted for regardless of the method. One such threat is researcher bias.

Researcher bias is viewed as a threat to trustworthiness in a research study such as this where the researcher is also a colleague of the research participants. The transcendental phenomenological method requires the

researcher to utilize the phenomenological principle of reflexivity as part of the research process to ensure validity and trustworthiness in the results (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Reflexivity directly relates to researcher bias and is the ability of the researcher to evaluate himself or herself (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Lichtman (2010) stated, “One definition of reflexivity is bending back on oneself” (p. 121). The principle of reflexivity in transcendental phenomenological research is vital to trustworthiness in reporting results, because it is a built-in self-evaluation system that consistently requires the researcher to reflect on his or her biases and preconceptions (Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994).

Reflexivity is also important as a phenomenological principle, because it constantly acts as a check to the researcher in confirming that research findings are not the researcher’s biased interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1997; Moustakas, 1994). Other trustworthiness checks made in transcendental phenomenological research, as listed by Creswell (2013), are as follows: (a) Did the interviewer influence the participants’ experience? (b) Is the transcription of the interviews accurate? (c) During transcription analysis, were conclusions possible? (d) Can the structural description be traced back to the original examples of the experience? (e) Is the structural description specific or general?

Positionality of the Researcher

Creswell (2013) concluded that all researchers mold the writing that emerges from qualitative research. Creswell added, "How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research" (p. 215). Lichtman (2010) viewed qualitative researchers this way:

Qualitative researchers involve themselves in every aspect of their work.

Through their eyes, data are developed and interpreted. Through their eyes, meaning is brought from an amalgam of words, images, and interpretations. Through their eyes, a creative work comes into fruition.

We are not static humans who maintain an aloof posture as we pursue our thoughts, dreams, and desires and the thoughts, dreams, and desires of those from whom we learn. Rather, our work is an expression of who we are and who we are becoming. (p. 121)

I elected to study teacher-student relationships, because I am a K-12 public school teacher. More specifically, I am a secondary school teacher who works with students who are identified as at risk of school and life failure. I am also the product of a disadvantaged background and was identified as at promise. I am raising six children who too are identified as at promise. Equally important, I am a teacher of students who are identified as at promise.

Experience has taught me that a key element to a successful education is the relationships that students have with their teachers. From personal experience, I

agree completely that students are more academically successful when they have positive relationships with their teachers. However, I do not believe that the only measure of success is academic achievement. I do believe that the positive relationships that children and youth experience with their teachers and other adults on school campuses are the foundational building blocks toward a successful adult life.

This research inquiry was multifaceted. This study detailed elements and levels of teacher care for students; ways in which teachers could recognize students in meaningful ways; and the importance of classroom and school culture, teacher mindset, and current legislation specifically designed to account for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Multifaceted inquiry was intentional, because the needs of students are multifaceted, and the whole child must be viewed through several lenses grounded in a critical consciousness that sees the at-risk students for who their future selves can be and not just for their current life realities. My own educational journey was largely constructed by the experiences I had with my teachers and other adults in my schooling process. All students, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, need teachers to be a source of positivity and encouragement in their lives. Students need teachers who work to value them, find ways to connect with them, and build them up using intentional acts of care and recognition. My kindergarten teacher once allowed me to teach the class, because she said she thought I was smarter than her. I do not know what I

talked about that day or what we did. Nevertheless, the message of her thinking I was smart was something that empowered me, and I have carried that with me my entire life. She was a source of positivity and encouragement.

In middle school, I had a counselor who called me into her office and handed me a book of famous African American people, and as I flipped through the pages, she explained to me who each of them was and how she expected the next edition of the book to include a page about me. She encouraged me to enter a poetry-writing contest. After a lot of coaxing, I did and even earned second place. She was a source of positivity and encouragement. Teachers are uniquely situated to be positive and encouraging to their students, and each of those points begins with a connection. Teaching has been the most rewarding career I think I could have chosen. It has had some incredible ups and downs, and I have worked in an environment where I was the only African American person for years and eventually one of a few African American people. I have had negative experiences for no other reason than the color of my skin, and yet I have been allowed to share so much of my hope and joy with hundreds and maybe even thousands of students and peers. I pray the experience of being exposed to me has changed everyone for the better, and I certainly hold the lessons I learned related to this in high regard. I view my role in education as a reflection of my identity and as a connection to my life's purpose. My identity as an African American woman and as a teacher serving a community where I am

one of the only African American professionals my students will see as part of their K-12 schooling process is full of intersection.

I had one Caucasian student in my first year in the district raise her hand in the middle of class and ask me to produce my teaching credentials, because her father told her African American people could not be educated. Dazed and confused by her expectation of who I was, I accepted her question as a truthful reflection of what she had been taught about people who looked like me. I was hurt and sad, but none of that could be on display, because I knew I needed to turn that awkward energy that filled the room into a teachable moment. I did not know it then, but I know now that I chose to have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006; Senge, 2013). By adopting this way of thinking, I did not limit my students to where I found them but instead believed that I could expose them to a new way of thinking and learning that superseded the words found in their textbooks and even the beliefs and attitudes they held about an entire race of people.

I am over a decade removed from that experience, and I feel like I have come full circle in that same school district after I walked into my classroom and a couple of the only African American girls at my school site had written a note for me on my white board. The message wished me a happy birthday, and it was simply signed “from your favorite African Americans”; I loved it. Suddenly, in a world full of people who made others feel bad about who they were, my students were telling me that I was making them feel good about being little African American girls. There is simply nothing better. I do not know the lasting impact I

will have on these young girls, but I do know that I want them and all my students to feel empowered enough to not settle for anything less than their best, because in their schooling process they were cared for and recognized by an adult they too cared for and respected. It is important to hear them, to recognize their humanity, and to be sensitive to the diversity of their needs. I think it is imperative that I am culturally sensitive to the uniqueness of my students' situations, whether they come from a low-income home, are second-language learners, or come from less traditional home settings such as being the product of a single-parent family, the foster care system, or parents who are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community.

Today's students bring in a wealth of various cultural experiences and backgrounds that can and should be leveraged to their benefit and not to their detriment. True positive teacher-student relationship building, especially with students identified as at promise, seeks to value the cultural capital students bring to the learning environment and places a responsibility on the teacher to honor and respect the norms and values that have gone into shaping students (Yosso, 2005). To that end, I also feel a moral obligation to speak with my colleagues and administration in an effort to constantly have dialogue about what we can do to increase the level of care and understanding we offer to all of our students.

Summary

Chapter Three discussed the elements of this qualitative study that examined the experiences of teachers who work with at-risk children and youth in a secondary middle school setting in the Inland Empire in Southern California. A presentation of the methodology employed to complete the relevant research aspects of this study was also outlined. In addition, the elements of the research study discussed included the research sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Other elements discussed in Chapter Three were validity and trustworthiness as well as the positionality of the researcher. The upcoming chapters describe the connection between the research questions and the findings as well as a detailed and thorough illumination of the findings, future implications, policy recommendations, pedagogical practices, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This transcendental phenomenological study was conducted for the purpose of exploring how teachers in a secondary school setting described their lived experiences with their student populations identified as at promise. The research question chosen to capture the essence of this phenomenon was, “How do secondary teachers in a middle school setting describe their experiences in building relationships with students identified as at promise?”

Phenomenology, as a methodology, has deep philosophical roots and was well-suited to capture the experiences of the teachers as they saw their interactions with students categorized as disadvantaged (Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994). This research did not seek to generalize about the experiences of all teachers. However, it did yield understanding of how these teacher participants applied meaning and understanding to their interactions with students identified as at promise in a public middle school setting.

Chapter Four presents the profile of the participants and the results of the study, including significant statements, themes, and the textual description of what the participants experienced. Additional findings are the structural descriptions that detail how the participants experienced their teacher-student relationships with at-promise students. Special attention was paid to the varied meanings, perspectives, and diverse roles of the participants in relation to the

meaning, context, and setting around the phenomenon. The essence of the teachers' relationships with at-promise students as a phenomenon is also described in Chapter Four. The essence is the summation of the principal investigator's description of the phenomenon. This description was based on the structural and textual descriptions and sought to capture the essence of how these teachers applied meaning and understanding to their relationships with students identified as at promise in a secondary school setting.

Results of the Study

Three teachers were selected to participate in this study. Inclusion criteria for this transcendental phenomenological study were necessary in order to robustly describe the experiences of the participants. Inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

1. Participants had students classified as English language learners, foster care youth, or low-income students.
2. The participants practiced building positive relationships with the students they served. This was determined based on my observations of the teachers in addition to the comments made by students to me about their experiences in select teachers' classrooms.
3. Each teacher had at least 2 years of classroom teaching experience in a secondary school setting.

Overall, three current classroom teachers were interviewed for this study. The teachers had an average of 12.3 years of experience in education, with the most veteran teacher serving 21 years as a classroom teacher and the newest teacher serving six years in his/her current teaching assignment. In addition, all three participants taught in the same school district and at the same school site. Each teacher had at least six years of secondary school experience. All of the teachers reported having experience working with students considered at promise in a secondary school setting. All three of the teachers stated they had earned master's degrees in subjects including music, educational leadership, and holistic nutrition, respectively.

Data were collected utilizing the interview guide I created under the guidance of an expert panel of current practitioners who all held doctoral degrees and helped guide my entire research study. Each participant was sent a copy of the interview guide, invitation letter, and informed consent form via e-mail. The participants requested their interviews be conducted in their respective classrooms at the school site. Each interview began with a review of the aforementioned documentation, and I answered any questions the interviewee had about the interview process; in accordance with California State University, San Bernardino's Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy, I especially explained the ability of the participants to decline their participation in the study at any time. I affirmed to the participants that their identities and those of the people they spoke of in the recorded interviews would remain confidential. Thereafter, I

accepted their signed consent forms and proceeded with each interview. In accordance with the phenomenological study design, additional clarifying or exploratory questions were asked, based on the interviewees' responses to the questions from the interview guide, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the respondents' stated experiences.

Upon completion of the face-to-face interviews, I reviewed the recordings and then transcribed each. Each participant was then given a copy of the transcribed interview and asked to review it for accuracy. After each participant affirmed the transcription of his/her interview was accurate, I utilized the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis as described by Moustakas (1994) to analyze the data:

1. *Epoche*: I began my analysis by first describing my own personal experiences with the phenomenon of being a teacher of at-risk students. This was done to set aside my own personal experiences so that the focus was on the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). This process is known as bracketing or epoche and was detailed in Chapter Three of this study (Husserl, 1913/2012; Moustakas, 1994).
2. *Horizontalization*: During the interview process, I made sure to closely follow the interview guide as well as to focus on limiting my talking to asking follow-up questions or clarifying statements made by the participants. To ensure I was constantly aware of my own biases, I recorded my biases as memos or in the margins of the transcriptions

as they emerged. Each line of the transcripts was reviewed several times and assigned equal value in terms of importance. I highlighted all significant statements within the transcripts that described the participants' experiencing the phenomenon (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction was achieved by eliminating all statements that did not directly connect to the participants' experience of relationships with at-promise students.

3. *Significant statements*: All sentences and block quotes that reflected how the participants described their relationship experiences with at-promise students were highlighted.
4. *Similar significant statements gathered into clusters*: All significant statements were placed into groups or clusters of meaning based on how the statements overlapped or connected to each other (Giorgi, 1997). These clusters represented the different themes of relationship building with at-promise students each participant stated he or she had experienced. Upon completion of this step in the analysis process, the significant statements and formulated meanings were made available for review to the participants to confirm that my interpretation of their statements accurately reflected their meanings.
5. *Textual description*: This step of the analysis process described *what* the participants in the study experienced and included exact examples from the participant interviews. Once all of the significant statements

and meanings were formulated and clustered into themes, I re-evaluated all of the statements and the meanings derived and checked them against the themes to ensure they fitted appropriately. A table was then created depicting a few of the significant statements for each theme. These example tables were then added to the themes as part of the analysis process.

6. *Structural description*: In this step, I described the setting and context of the phenomenon in order to describe *how* the phenomenon occurred according to how the participants experienced their teacher-student relationships with at-promise students.
7. *Composite description*: A final measure of analysis described in the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological analysis is for the researcher to describe the essence of the experience as described by all participants (Moustakas, 1994). This step required the combining of both the textual and structural descriptions and is the culminating paragraph of this phenomenological study. This passage includes *what* and *how* the study participants experienced their relationships with at-promise students (Moustakas, 1994).

Descriptive Data

Epoche

My research interest in examining teachers' relationships with at-risk students began with a conversation I had with a colleague. He informed me that I needed to meet with our new principal, because several changes were being made to the electives to be offered for the upcoming school year. He told me that several teachers on our campus were being assigned support classes that were meant to address students with chronic failing grades. He attributed this need to the fast-changing demographics of the school district. Over his long tenure in the district, he had witnessed a spike in low-income families and English language learners, and each group had contributed to a decline in student achievement for the district. He then informed me that he was too good of a teacher to waste his talent on teaching classes for students whom he perceived as lacking parental support or motivation and having poor grades, poor behavior, or attendance issues.

Based on what I perceived as a lack of understanding of the issues faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, I felt compelled to explore if and how such negative feelings influenced the relationships teachers forged with at-risk students. To gain insight into the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships, I wanted to first explore what teachers had experienced in defining their role when building positive relationships with their students. After that conversation, I began to reflect on other conversations with other colleagues

about students who fit one or more of the categories that this colleague described to me. Teaching support classes was nothing new to me, and I had done so for several years. I had already had a conversation with the new principal about teaching support classes for the next school year, primarily because I had been struggling with what felt like an overall trend in education that reduced disadvantaged students in the school community to their perceived deficiencies. Ultimately, scheduling would not permit me to teach a support class; however, I chose to pursue a study that would allow me to address how teachers in my school community experienced and described their relationships with students considered at risk of school failure.

In this transcendental phenomenological research, it was imperative to capture the experiences and descriptions of what my interview participants had to say. To accomplish this, I listened closely to each recorded interview. I also reviewed the transcribed interviews. In addition, I wrote down my own experiences with students considered at risk and constantly reflected on and recorded my personal thoughts and feelings about the responses I heard as part of the interview process with the participants. I also made sure to ask only clarifying questions about the responses of the participants and not interject my own knowledge or experiences about the research topic.

One example of this was when I specifically asked how each participant defined an at-risk student. In each interview, I accepted the response of the interview participant at face value and without judgment. In one interview, the

participant asked if he defined the term *at risk* correctly, and I responded by saying there was no wrong or right answer; it was strictly his own interpretation. After this interview, I wrote down my own feelings and thoughts about that exchange in an effort to determine if a preconceived notion or bias had arisen in me over the occurrence. I examined myself to tease out any judgments I may have experienced due to the exchange. I asked myself questions to check my assumptions about this particular participant's question to me.

One of my assumptions was that the participant wanted to please me and, therefore, wanted me to confirm his response or give him what I would perceive to be a correct one. Another assumption was that the participant was being disingenuous and looking for affirmation from me in an attempt to possibly say what I was hoping to hear instead of speaking from his own personal experience. I had the opportunity to try to discern this and other similar preconceived notions, biases, and personal experiences that were a part of my thought process during this study. This type of deep, meaningful, and conscientious self-analysis was consistently done throughout the data collection process and allowed me to be constantly aware of how my own thinking and experiences influenced the data collection process and, therefore, allowed me to isolate and mostly separate those experiences, preconceived notions, and biases from those of the three participants.

Themes

During the process of analyzing the data, several codes surfaced from the horizontalization process. After further review, analysis, and synthesizing of significant statements and formulated meanings, five themes emerged from the data as follows:

1. targeting and providing intentional acts of care to students,
2. developing reciprocal trust as a means of connection,
3. the need for teachers to be role models and to be inspirational,
4. the need for teachers to respect and recognize students, and
5. overcoming disengagement to reach struggling students.

Theme 1: Targeting and Providing Intentional Acts of Care to Students. An in-depth review of the interviews and analysis of the formulated meanings and significant statements resulted in the first theme, targeting and providing intentional acts of care to students. This theme was derived from all three teacher interviews. Table 3 represents the findings for Theme 1. The discussion that follows is organized by the formulated meanings that emerged from the interviews. Significant statements that supported the identified formulated meanings and described the teachers' experiences follow each formulated meaning.

Table 3

Significant Statement and Formulated Meaning Examples of Theme 1: Targeting and Providing Intentional Acts of Care to Students

| Significant statement | Formulated meaning |
|--|--|
| I want for them [at-promise students] what I want for all of them [students in general]. I want them to be successful. I want them to go out into the world and feel like they are a positive impact on the environment around them. (Participant 2, 2016) | Care displayed as hope for students' future successes |
| I think all teachers can take on a parental role, for sure. For some students, it might be greater than others. I think some students will kind of latch onto you if they see that you're sort of giving in parental love or kindness or patience. I think those students that do latch on you probably aren't getting that at home. (Participant 3, 2016) | Intentionally seeking out students to offer a type of parental love and kindness |
| It was more about, I'm sure it was more of a nurturing, safe place because you're young, and you want to feel comfortable and safe. (Participant 1, 2016) | Providing a nurturing and safe environment for students to be successful |

Care displayed as hope for students' future successes. A consistent theme throughout the interviews with the three teachers was that they all expressed concern for the future success of their students. One teacher stated,

I feel like people [students] who have a low bar for their goal, I want them to achieve high and also find the value of everything that they are learning now is going to help them as an adult. Math, history, English, everything will help them even if they don't see it yet, because it does all come full

circle. Sometimes it's hard to explain, and sometimes there is some weird math question that they might not ever use again in their life, but I would say at least 70% of the math that they're learning they will use as an adult. They just don't see it. (Participant 3, 2016)

Another teacher believed that being a teacher not only allowed her to teach a subject matter that she loved but also granted her the ability to impact students in a way that far exceeded the technical expectations of teaching core content. Care, in this sense, was described by each teacher as more than just rooted in the academic achievements of his or her students. The participant teachers mentioned providing a type of care for their at-promise students that was rooted in a sincere concern for their personal wellness. One teacher noted,

Reading and writing and all of those things, yes, but I would much rather have a student come back to me in 10 years and say, "Thanks for helping me learn how to advocate for myself with my own teachers because I had a conversation with my calculus teacher one time . . ." or "because when I went to college . . ." I would rather have a student say, "You taught me how to speak to teachers." That would be more important to me than if they came back and said, "Thanks for teaching me how to use quotation marks correctly." You can Google that all day long. (Participant 1, 2016)

Two of the teachers interviewed noted that they desired to be viewed as people with whom their students could have a positive teacher-student relationship. When asked if at-promise students were doing the best they could

academically, one teacher linked it back to the type of care provided in the classroom setting for his students. He commented,

I think it depends on the kid. I think they're going to give us what they feel like giving until they know. They don't care how much we know as teachers until they know how much we care. That's kind of corny, but it's true. I feel like they're not going to try until they know that we're laying it on the line for them, but then they will. (Participant 2, 2016)

He went on to say,

They're far more capable than we give them credit for and most adults in their life will ever give them credit for. They learn at a young age that "if I'm bad at doing the dishes, I don't have to do the dishes," or "if I'm bad at doing this, or that, or whatever it is—mowing the lawn, taking out the trash—my parents will just do it for me," but they're capable of the world. It may take them a little longer, and it may not be quite as refined, but they are capable of far more than we give them credit, and I think if we treat them like they're capable of producing higher quality work, they rise to the occasion. That empowers them, and I think that's kind of a way to show that you care about someone: empower them. (Participant 2, 2016)

One teacher said she was troubled by some of the things she believed limited her students from working as hard as they could at present in order to prepare for their future. She went on to say,

I [the student] can become a high school dropout because that's what happened. I can become a flat mess because my parents got divorced. We can become those things, or we can become almost anything that we really want to become, and so many of those kids at risk for any reason, they've got to find somehow, somewhere that belief that they have the power to change their own course. (Participant 1, 2016)

This teacher expressed concern over conversations she said she had had with students, both past and present. She felt she had developed close relationships with these students and often thought about where they would be in their future. She spoke of one student in particular who had been a student of hers previously. She described her as an at-risk student who had blossomed in her class and in her middle school environment but had recently lost her way nearing the end of her high school career. She said she knew students like her often had bigger obstacles, but they could decide their story would not be their parents' story.

Intentionally seeking out students to offer a type of parental love and kindness. One teacher interviewed clearly indicated that he recognized a need to be a parental type of figure in his students' lives. He mentioned how he continually sought to speak up on behalf of certain students when he felt they were being unfairly treated. Although the teacher did not like to think of this as being nurturing to his students, because he viewed that as a weakness, he clearly thought of himself as a type of protector of these students. He explained,

“I wouldn’t quite call me nurturing; I’m definitely not your mommy or like a, ‘Hey there, little guy’ for little things. For larger issues, I will definitely be there for them. I would go to bat for these kids” (Participant 2, 2016).

Another teacher mentioned,

So many of them [students] aren’t getting that [support] at home. Not that I know every secret about parenting or raising children, but it’s like I want you to become better people. We’re all trying to do that all the time.

(Participant 3, 2016)

This teacher mentioned that her desire to be a teacher was rooted in her experiences with a couple of her own teachers in elementary and middle school. She cited those experiences as what she considered the “foundation of good teaching” (Participant 3, 2016). She specifically acknowledged her fifth-grade teacher: “You felt like she was your mom, but you also didn’t want to disappoint her. She had strict rules that you would want to follow, and expectations were high, yet it was all very loving and very kind” (Participant 3, 2016).

When a question was posed to one interview participant about how she perceived her relationship with her students, she replied,

Well, after becoming a parent, I know I changed significantly as a teacher. Like I totally shifted how I saw myself as a teacher, so the students I have [had] since becoming a parent I would say got the better deal. My job is to teach, and I teach English, so there is always that. However, teaching English is almost secondary to what I think is my responsibility in the

classroom. English is almost secondary. My purpose here, and I believe it is anyway, is that I am trying my best to get these children to find a way to believe in themselves and to equip themselves with what they need to be better people and better students. I see my students through the lens of me being a parent, and that is so different than using my lens of being their English teacher. I was able to have my own child go through this school and my class, and I will have my other kid next year. It is just a new ballgame when you view your students as someone else's child and not just as a student in your classroom. (Participant 1, 2016)

She went on to say,

Just like we do with our own children, I can be disappointed in what you've [student has] done. You could have flat out failed at something. You can be disciplined for something, but I'm not going to disrespect you, because you're human. (Participant 1, 2016)

For this teacher, acknowledging her students' humanity by recognizing that they will make mistakes and, therefore, need understanding and forgiveness was essential.

Providing a nurturing and safe environment for students to be successful. In sharing their perspectives and experiences in regard to their relationships with at-risk students, all three interview participants definitively declared the value of providing a classroom environment that was conducive to student learning because, it was rich in student-protective factors that promoted

a sense of security. Each teacher also described his or her mindfulness of the need to have a class culture that encouraged students to feel safe and connected. All three of the teachers interviewed said they knew of other teachers' classrooms on the school campus that did not make space for students from disadvantaged or challenging backgrounds. Instead, these teachers reported that some of those students shared with them that they felt isolated or lacked a willingness to risk learning in those environments because they would be made to feel inferior. In one case, a teacher stated that she had had a conversation with one of her colleagues about a student they shared, and the colleague said she had never called on the student to speak in class, because, based on his grades, he did not have anything to add to the class discussion. Another teacher remarked, "I'm here to teach, but teaching somebody is impossible if the learner doesn't feel heard or involved. I'm doing everything I can every day to make them feel welcome, to make them feel involved" (Participant 3, 2016).

Relational recognition, the purposeful act of educators seeking to acknowledge students by simple acts of humanity, in the class setting was a practice that each teacher stated he or she desired to achieve in his or her classroom. These teachers' need to make students feel involved and welcomed was also something they linked back to their own experiences as students in school. One teacher said he viewed his desire to ensure a safe and nurturing

environment for his students as a way of paying homage to the teachers who had done exactly that for him. He stated,

I feel like I owe it to them because I have had many incredible teachers in my life that didn't have to go the extra mile for me that did. I would not be here if they had not decided, for whatever reason, "We're going to help this kid out." I feel like I need to pay it back/pay it forward. (Participant 2, 2016)

When asked how he set out to intentionally provide a classroom environment reflective of his positive experiences, this participant responded,

I try to keep a relaxed environment. I want my room to be a safe environment. I know that doesn't mean they're [students are] safe from criticism, that doesn't mean they're perfect the way they are and special snowflakes. No, we're growing. If we're not growing and improving, what are we doing? We're wasting precious time, wasting our future, their future, and that's not acceptable. (Participant 2, 2016)

When asked how the classroom environment might be experienced by students in her classroom, one teacher, who only taught support classes for English language learners and students who had had consistently poor academics for one or more consecutive years, viewed it this way:

Each kid kind of feels like two or three kids with their needs, but we talk a lot about being brave and raising your hand and asking for questions, and we are all in this class because we know we need support. Everybody is

probably confused at the same thing, so always using, at least practicing that being brave in my class is the best place to do it because it's just me and 14 other people that are going to know, not 33. (Participant 3, 2016)

Another teacher noted that her classroom environment was focused on listening to her students. She said, "Children know when they're not being listened to at almost any age" (Participant 1, 2016). She added, "You can be nurturing and loving and such, but you also must be firm and show that you care and, above all, take the time to listen to what they are saying and not saying" (Participant 1, 2016). When asked to give an example of this, she stated,

If I'm listening to my kids when they're talking to me, whether it's they're answering a question they've been asked that's academically based, or whether it's me asking them, "How was your day?" I'm listening to them if I remember anything about them. Or when I come up to a student a week later and comment about something that I read in one of their papers, they are like, "Are you kidding me? Like you actually read that?" I think, "Of course, I read it!" But I have to prove that sometimes, or I think giving them responsibility helps too. I think sometimes hand-holding and "I'm here for you" helps, but I think sometimes too it's the letting go of their hand like, "No, I trust that you can do this on your own. I'm going to go ahead and let you try and do this, and you're going to get back to me." And I think those type of things help them feel safe and feel cared for and, in turn, helps them to be successful. (Participant 1, 2016)

This participant concluded,

There's no reason to talk down to people. They're [students are] going to do it because they're young and immature, and they're figuring life out, but the minute I talk down to my students, I'm going to lose their faith, I'm going to lose them. No sense in that. (Participant 1, 2016)

This teacher concluded that her classroom environment was situated in mutual respect, so she had an obligation to make room for students when they were not being successful.

Theme 2: Developing Reciprocal Trust as a Means of Connection. An in-depth review of the interviews and analysis of the formulated meanings and significant statements resulted in the second theme, developing reciprocal trust as a means of connection. This theme was derived from all three teacher interviews. Table 4 represents the findings for Theme 2. The discussion of the findings for Theme 2 is organized by the formulated meanings that emerged from the interviews. Significant statements that supported the identified formulated meanings and described the teachers' experiences follow each formulated meaning.

Table 4

*Significant Statement and Formulated Meaning Examples of Theme 2:
Developing Reciprocal Trust as a Means of Connection*

| Significant statement | Formulated meaning |
|--|--|
| I think first and foremost, you have to have a trusting relationship. (Participant 3, 2016) | Building trust helps teachers connect to students. |
| Trust, both ways. I have to trust them [students]. That's just . . . there's no other way to say that. We have to trust one another, whether it's when I've asked you [student] to do something that you're going to do it or when you turned your work in . . . especially with writing, especially as an English teacher. That's so personal and private, and so many kids struggle with that, so they have to trust that I'm going to handle that with dignity and grace, and so trust. (Participant 1, 2016) | Trust and respect is a two-way street. |
| You have to trust that I'm going to be honest with you so that you can improve but not shut down on me because I've given you feedback. (Participant 1, 2016) | Trust impacts the ability of the teacher to provide instruction. |

Building trust helps teachers connect to students. The most recurring concept that persisted in each interview revolved around the notion of trust. All three teachers discussed the benefits of building and maintaining trusting relationships with their students. Therefore, trust was a key facet of the formation of healthy and positive teacher-student relationships. Participants also discussed the challenges of teaching when students were reluctant to extend or accept trust as a means of creating viable and sustainable teacher-student relationships.

One teacher described how she established trust in the first few weeks of the school year as a means of connecting to her students:

Consistency I think is key. People love patterns, but kids love patterns, and they thrive with patterns. They need it [trust] to be a consistent pattern. They need to know what to expect when they walk in the door, and if your mood is all over the place and your approach is all over the place . . . And I'm not saying that you can't do things that are fun and out there, but I think when students walk in to my classroom after those first few weeks, it's pretty clear exactly how it's going to be, and I think that makes them feel comfortable because they know where the parameters are. (Participant 1, 2016)

Another teacher viewed trust as a critical element in establishing relationships with her students. She said, "They've got to know that they can trust you, and you also need to have patience with their learning because everybody will learn at a different pace" (Participant 3, 2016). Furthermore, trusting some students and not others was viewed as something that could be detrimental to the classroom environment by one of the teachers interviewed. He said it was the little things that he realized his students paid attention to, for example, something as simple as who would be chosen to lead the class in music selections or whom he left on the list for his substitutes as his go-to students. He went on to say,

I try to treat them all equally. They know when someone is being treated differently or extended more freedoms, like running errands for me. I know we're not supposed to have favorites. We definitely have kids we connect with more just based on who we are, that's human nature, and therefore you might be willing to extend them more trust or trust them with things over other students. There are going to be people and activities we connect with based on our prior activities and our interests and whatever it may be, but I try to treat them all and look at them all the same. They're all capable of maybe not the same exact quality, but they're all capable of giving the same percent of their effort in what they are. I don't want to rob them of that, so I really try to look at them just that they are equal and give them opportunities so that they feel trusted. That works for me in my classroom, and it works for them because they really want me to trust them. (Participant 2, 2016)

One teacher explained the importance of building trust with her students and described how she did it. She said she recognized that many of her at-promise students struggled with the concept of trust, both in how to give it and how to receive it. Although she said she had never directly inquired of her students why that was, she discerned by working with them that they often built walls around themselves to protect themselves and not allow others to hurt them. Overall, she described her observation of her students' tactics or coping mechanisms that ensured their ability to control or deal with the external

pressures or traumas they had experienced or were currently experiencing in their lives. She continued,

Maybe I'll take five minutes of the period to have a discussion about whatever they feel like, maybe throw in some jokes in here and there, making people laugh, because not everything we learn is fun, but I think throwing in some humor here and there will make them want to show up and view me as someone that is relatable. That is how I lay the foundation to begin the journey of building trust between my students and I. (Participant 3, 2016)

This participant said that she found her ability to make her students laugh was the best way to get them to let their guards down so that she might begin to establish trust with them.

Trust and respect is a two-way street. In addition to all three teachers stating the need to build trust in their relationships with their students, two of them spoke specifically to their desire to have trust for their students as much as they desired to have their students trust them. Reciprocal trust, therefore, was a critical element in how teachers in a middle school setting defined, described, and experienced relationships with at-risk students. One teacher remarked,

I need to do my best to make it [trust] meaningful, and they [students] need to do their best to make it [trust] meaningful. I think that's kind of finding that balance of trust, once again, and also a little bit of that fear of letting them down. I need to be in control, and I need to make sure that if I

know that I don't ever want to let down my kids, I always want to do my best. Even if I don't feel good, I still need to do the best that I can that day. Even if on a day that I'm feeling wonderful, that might be half as much. I think that's also the same with the students. Sometimes they'll work their best because they don't want to let down their teacher or their parent. (Participant 3, 2016)

Another teacher added that respect was a facet of trust when it came to her relationships with her students, and one ceased to exist without the other. Gaining both the trust and respect of her students was a goal she wanted to achieve. She explained, "Respect. Gosh, if a student doesn't respect the teacher, it's pretty much all out the window at that point. Building respect and trust with students is going to be critical" (Participant 1, 2016). When asked to give an example of how her students knew she trusted and respected them in order to have it reciprocated, she stated,

They have to have that sense of me being [there] for them, and I think then their respect builds with that because I always do my very best to treat my students with respect, even when I'm angry, even when I'm disappointed. (Participant 1, 2016)

Another teacher commented,

I do shoot for that meaningful relationship, where it [trust] goes two ways. Sometimes you have a student where they don't open up, can't break them down to kind of get that wall down. Those are some times that

you've got to slowly and gently get there. Sometimes that takes more than one year. Sometimes I'll find out more about a student after they're no longer my student. Then they'll come visit me, and I'm like, "Ah, you didn't come, you didn't give me all this information when you were my student!" (Participant 3, 2016)

Trust as a two-way street was also rooted in a desire to help students in their overall academics for one teacher. He said, "It's harder as my classes get larger, and this is the first year I haven't been able to do this regularly, but I would check in biweekly, at least once a month, on all of their grades" (Participant 2, 2016). He said he would do this and then speak with the students about what they needed to do to be successful in their other classes and provide them with an opportunity to make a plan to bring their grades up. He explained,

The concept is simple: If they aren't passing their other classes, they will be pulled from my class. It just goes both ways; I know they want to be here, and I want them here, so we are in it together. (Participant 2, 2016)

This participant went on to state,

I told them [students], "If I can't trust you with this thing that should be important to you, how can I trust you with showing up for performances at theme parks or around town?" Those things are important to this program. (Participant 2, 2016)

Once the plan was in place, this teacher would tell his students that they needed to stick to it and show him that they were serious about being people of their word and doing whatever it was they had said they would do.

Trust impacts the ability of the teacher to provide instruction. One teacher described the necessity of building trusting relationships with her English students as a prerequisite for her to do her job:

Trust. I think honesty, but those are kind of the same things. Hopefully the delicate area of “I have to be able to be critical of your work, and you have to trust that I’m doing that to help you, not to make you feel worse about what you’re doing.” We talk about that in class a lot. I have to do this. I have to edit your papers. I have to talk about what you did. You can’t look at that as, “My paper is less than great, so that makes me less than great.” No, no, no. There’s no translation there. I’m grading your work. You have to trust that I’m going to be honest with you so that you can improve but not shut down on me because I’ve given you feedback.
(Participant 1, 2016)

Trust, as a prerequisite to forming a positive teacher-student relationship, was interwoven into the ecology of the classroom culture of these teachers.

Above the academic pursuits of classroom rigor, trust, as reported by the three teacher participants, acts as a living organism that is constantly affirmed between teacher and student. The intentional acts by these teachers to treat their students with kindness, respect, and understanding were not based on one-time

attempts but were pursued as a recursive measure to connect with their at-risk student populations. One teacher said that if his students did not trust him, his program would “cease to exist” (Participant 2, 2016). As a band teacher, he stated that his class was an elective in which students chose to participate. He candidly spoke of how he spent the greater part of his day critiquing everything his students did, so if they did not trust him to do so for their own betterment, the students would either choose to stop signing up for his course or cease to want to try, while they were in the class. He said he understood why he came to the classroom every day, and it was mainly to live his passion. However, he stated that he needed his students to trust that because he was doing his job of critiquing their work, it was only a critique of their efforts and not a critique of the students as people. This teacher said that a lack of trust in his students for him could also “catch like wildfire” in a classroom such as his. He went on to say,

A person who feels like they’re doing good in the world will continue doing good in the world. A person who feels like their existence is a negative thing will convey that to the world and try to bring people down with them. (Participant 2, 2016)

Another teacher explained how she had experienced her third-grade teacher’s attempts to build trust with her and her peers by sharing stories of her personal life. She noted that she remembered how much she and her classmates had wanted to accomplish things like getting all of their work done

and being good students in that teacher's classroom, because they felt like she cared about them. She stated,

She [third-grade teacher] also talked a lot about her personal life, so I think us [students] knowing her personal life, what she did on the weekends, what she did at home, her family, and that kind of stuff kind of breaks down that little stranger barrier so that you know more about them, and you know that they're people too, and they make mistakes, and they hurt, and they love and all that. (Participant 3, 2016)

This participant went on to say that many of her students stood at a precipice in their educational journeys and had to decide daily if the risk they were taking in learning was worth the possibility of failure. Therefore, she said she modeled her teaching style in much the same way as her own third-grade teacher, because if her students did not trust that she recognized and wanted to connect with them on a personal level, they would not see her as someone who genuinely cared about them and their learning.

Theme 3: The Need for Teachers to Be Role Models and to Be Inspirational. An in-depth review of the interviews and analysis of the formulated meanings and significant statements resulted in the third theme, the need for teachers to be role models and to be inspirational. This theme was derived from all three teacher interviews. Table 5 represents the findings for Theme 3. The discussion of the findings for Theme 3 is organized by the formulated meanings that emerged from the interviews. Significant statements that supported the

identified formulated meanings and described the teachers' experiences follow each formulated meaning.

Table 5

Significant Statement and Formulated Meaning Examples of Theme 3: The Need for Teachers to Be Role Models and to Be Inspirational

| Significant statement | Formulated meaning |
|---|---|
| They're [students are] going to grow up and run the world someday. How they choose to run it and how they choose to look at the world is going to be dependent on how the world [teachers] treated them. (Participant 2, 2016) | If they can see it, they can achieve it. |
| A person can tell when you truly have their best interest in mind and when you're just feeding them what we're supposed to say, what will get you out of the conversation quickest. (Participant 2, 2016) | Behavior should be modeled that makes others feel valued. |
| When home is challenging, when home is not safe, when home is not stable, then they [students] come here and they wreak havoc. Probably maybe they have to be stable at home, and they're tired of being stable, so they come here and then they act differently. . . . We [teachers] need to recognize it and try to find ways to inspire them to overcome those challenges. (Participant 3, 2016) | Inspiring students is a means to reach students. |

If they can see it, they can achieve it. In each of the three interviews, the teacher held that students needed to see positive role models on a daily basis. The teachers also reported that they saw a strong need for students to be

inspired, and that need was far greater for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. One teacher shared,

It's [success is] almost impossible without it being modeled just by human nature. Our minds can only comprehend that which we've witnessed, or observed, or lived. Even the most creative people, it's still relative to the world we understand as we understand it, so if their [students'] world is so narrow just by unfortunate circumstance that they only know a very bleak outlook on the world, it's hard for them to apply more of themselves to get out of that, even for themselves, because my parents did it, my grandparents did it, so yes, those kids exist. No, it's not permanent. I think if there's any chance that we can pull them out of it, I think we should. We owe it to the future of our society. I mean, we're going to have to live with them. (Participant 2, 2016)

Another teacher stated, "They [at-promise students] have to have some kind of a role model. There has to be somebody; somebody has to spark that thing that they think, 'I can be like them or do what they do'" (Participant 1, 2016). She noted that the need for these students to see that model behavior in a primary caregiver or parent was ideal, but if that were not the case, then someone to whom they had immediate access became even more important. She went on to say that celebrities are good, but a teacher or coach is optimal. This participant said that all students, but especially at-promise students, needed to have something tangible that made them say, "Yeah, I want to be like that."

One teacher who was interviewed commented that how he greeted his students every day was something that some people took for granted, but for many of his students, it showed them actions that they did not often have the chance to witness at home or at school. He said,

Every day I say good morning. I tell them goodbye; I want them to know “have a good weekend,” “have a good day,” or “have the day you deserve,” whatever I’m feeling at the time and how they treat me that day. I had a couple kids during Halloween like, “You’re the only teacher that told us to have fun and be safe out there.” Not that I’m trying to scare them. I know I’m not the only one that cares about their well-being, but I’m the only one, for some of these kids, who told them that “while you’re out there having fun, running around being goofballs,” to be safe. They probably don’t hear that very often at home either. They have to see it. They have to see it modeled for them if they are going to in turn grow up and give that back to their own kids and the world. (Participant 2, 2016)

Recognizing his students in this manner was something this teacher thought not only showed the students that he valued and cared for them but also allowed him to connect to them on more than an academic level. He believed these conversations with his students also conveyed to them that he truly cared for students’ overall well-being.

Behavior should be modeled that makes others feel valued. Two teachers expressed how important it was to stop and listen to what their students

had to say as an intentional act in order to model behavior that showed the students they mattered. One teacher said this was something he practiced daily with his students, and he often drew attention to how and why he was doing it because “so many of my students do not seem to know what it looks or feels like to have someone value what they have to say” (Participant 2, 2016). He went on to express his sadness because he often had colleagues come to speak with him, and although they saw him clearly engaged in a conversation with a student, “they just barge on up and start to speak to me as though the conversation I was just in with my student did not matter” (Participant 2, 2016).

The same participant also said, “If you want a student to understand how they should act, you have to model it with them so they have a proper behavior to emulate” (Participant 2, 2016). Finally, he connected the idea of modeling behavior to how students felt about themselves. He stated,

I think by empowering the children that way [modeling behavior], they start doing the same, and then it also impacts their academics, and they start producing higher quality work just because they feel better about themselves, and they feel like they can believe in what they’re doing.
(Participant 2, 2016)

Another teacher mentioned how she had learned how to make students feel welcomed and included in her classroom from seeing how one of her middle school teachers modeled the behavior. She said, “She would make it so we all felt welcomed. Even new students were included into the classroom. Watching

her do that taught us how to treat people, and I still use it today as part of my teaching strategy” (Participant 3, 2016). For this teacher, the feeling of belonging and acceptance not only made her want to be a better student but also helped to teach her how to be caring to her peers in the school community.

Inspiring students is a means to reach students. In her interview, one teacher spoke considerably about the need for teachers to be inspirational to their students. She defined being inspirational as exposing the students to thought-provoking events, people, or ideas that went beyond her English curriculum. She said she practiced being inspirational as part of her classroom dynamic. She explained,

We watch inspirational talks in class, and I expose them [students] to all different kinds of inspirational talks. Sometimes it’s athletes, and sometimes it’s scientists, and sometimes it’s a singer, and we do thoughts of the day where I talk to them about stuff that’s not English. Like the other day, we did one where “your life is either . . .” The question was, “Is life an ocean or a ball of clay? Is it something where you’re floating in the middle, and it’s controlling everything for you, or it’s a ball of clay that’s completely malleable and you’re forming?” The lesson was life is both, and some days we float with the tide, and we let life take us, and sometimes we pick up the ball of clay, and we make things that we want, but we have to be careful what we make, and they loved it, and there were these . . . I’m always trying to come at them from different angles when I’m

trying to bring inspirational things to the table because they all have different things that they're interested in. (Participant 1, 2016)

Another of the teachers interviewed said he did not always seek to be inspirational in his classroom, but he shared that one of his colleagues had students who responded to her so positively that he became both a little envious and curious as to what was her "it" factor. He concluded that she had been able to inspire them, and that had made him want to have that same rapport with his students. He said,

Clearly, I'm no Ms. Johnson [a pseudonym], and I will never be, but when I see her interact with students and see how former students respond to her, you can't help but look up to that and want it for yourself. (Participant 2, 2016)

Ultimately, he said, "I did not even know I was achieving it, but somehow I did, and I do intentionally try to inspire my students, and they are better for it, and I am a better teacher for it too" (Participant 2, 2016). He went on to say, "I've always been told middle school is not a good time of life, and it wasn't for me, but that is why it is so imperative to be inspiring to these kids" (Participant 2, 2016). He concluded by saying, "I've had so many students give me letters and come back and just say that they wish they were back" (Participant 2, 2016).

Another teacher commented that some of her students were suffering from unimaginable traumas, and those students came to school to be cared for and acknowledged, because they were not getting that at home. She said she

desired to inspire these kids, so that they knew that hope existed. She said having one of her students as a neighbor and previously having had his sister in her class had made her more committed to what it meant to intentionally inspire her students. She said her student had had it rough, because his grandmother had custody and ran a daycare out of the home, and his parents were not in the picture. She knew she had to show him through how she treated him and in what she taught him that there was more to life than his current circumstance. She explained what she had observed this way:

I hear yelling and shouting all the time at their [the student's] house. Sometimes I feel like getting to school is important, and that's about it. Knowing what their grades are, seeing if they're doing their best, and [seeing] if they are doing homework at home just isn't valued. "I brought you to school, that's all I need to do." I think sometimes it is so busy at [their] home. There are people in and out of the house all the time; there's people, I mean, sometimes they're with the neighbors, but you see them outside drinking and smoking a lot, probably when the kids should be studying, or even I see the kids playing basketball, or they're in the street. Play is good. Play is super beneficial, but for four hours after school, it might be a little bit excessive when I know that you could've used one of those hours to do homework. (Participant 3, 2016)

This teacher said she often tried to impress upon her students that they could achieve and that their effort and attitude mattered. She concluded,

We do a lot of growth mindset, so that big philosophy of thinking. Your growth mindset, I think, is your attitude. Setting expectations I think is also important to help them [students] achieve their goal. Small goals, big goals, like some that, you know, a goal that maybe they're going to reach during that period for one hour, maybe a goal for the week and a goal for the month and a goal for the school year is good for them to know.

(Participant 3, 2016)

This teacher connected the important role teachers play in student achievement, student success, and long-term student life trajectories through the growth mindset she had about her ability to teach her students and help them understand how their school and life goals were connected to their attitude and work ethic.

Theme 4: The Need for Teachers to Respect and Recognize Students. An in-depth review of the interviews and analysis of the formulated meanings and significant statements resulted in the fourth theme, the need for teachers to respect and recognize students. This theme was derived from all three teacher interviews. Table 6 represents the findings for Theme 4. The discussion of the findings for Theme 4 is organized by the formulated meanings that emerged from the interviews. Significant statements that supported the identified formulated meanings and described the teachers' experiences follow each formulated meaning.

Table 6

Significant Statement and Formulated Meaning Examples of Theme 4: The Need for Teachers to Respect and Recognize Students

| Significant statement | Formulated meaning |
|---|---|
| Just be genuine. A person can tell when you truly have their best interest in mind and when you're just feeding them what we're supposed to say, what will get you out of the conversation quickest. (Participant 2, 2016) | It is important to practice authenticity. |
| Building respect and trust with students is going to be critical. (Participant 1, 2016) | Respect is earned, not given. |
| Respect isn't given; it's earned. That is especially true with middle school kids. (Participant 2, 2016) | |
| Making them [students] feel valuable, even if they caught on a day later or a week later or a month later than what you actually, first time you taught it, I think can show that you're caring, giving them second chances, starting fresh every single day. Sometimes you have a bad day with a particular student or a group of students, and it is very easy to want to still have those feelings the next day where you're mad at them. Starting fresh each day is good. Also having guidance and rules and expectations I think all show them that they [teachers] care. Just being the fun, cool teacher doesn't necessarily let them know that you care about them. (Participant 3, 2016) | Students should feel valued and accepted while they overcome obstacles personally and academically. |

It is important to practice authenticity. All three teachers spoke about their need to be authentic or real in their classrooms. One teacher noted, "I try and be very real with them [students]. I'm not goofy, and I'm not condescending.

I'm pretty much me in all of my relationships. I'm the same way with my students" (Participant 1, 2016). In speaking about how teachers can convey authenticity to their students, one teacher reflected on her favorite elementary teacher. She said that the teacher held a special place in her heart, because she had been the first and last teacher she ever had in K-12 schooling who presented herself as a "real person" (Participant 3, 2016). This participant also stated that she desired to emulate her former teacher by incorporating that practice into her own teaching. She further described the teacher as follows:

She also talked a lot about her personal life, so I think us [students] knowing her personal life, what she did on the weekends, what she did at home, her family, and that kind of stuff kind of breaks down that little stranger barrier so that you know more about them, and you know that they're people too, and they make mistakes, and they hurt, and they love and all that. (Participant 3, 2016)

Another teacher stated he had strong feelings on the need for all teachers to be genuine with their students. He stated,

We're not equals; our kids are not our equals. They can't be; it'll get us in trouble and get them in trouble, but yeah, just treating them like people I think is what it means to be genuine or authentic. In fact, that is how I practice being genuine with them, like, you know, by showing them I respect them. A lot of times in their lives they're going to come across adults who don't expect much of them at this age. A kid is not like an

adult, but I joke with them, I say what I say, but at the end of the day we are people, and if we treat them like we would treat another adult or another person we would respect, I think we get the kind of work that we expect. It's one of those "reap what you sow." So, if I'm real with them, they will be real with me. (Participant 2, 2016)

This teacher equated teachers being genuine with their students to showing respect to the students. Unlike the teacher described above (Participant 3, 2016), this teacher did not consider sharing personal information as the leading factor of being authentic with his students. Instead, he solely based his ability to be genuine with his students on his ability to show them the same respect he would show any person.

Respect is earned, not given. Two teachers spoke about respect as something that has to be earned. Both stated that they felt it was their responsibility to gain the respect of their students in order for the students to be engaged in their classrooms. One teacher said she never wanted her students to confuse her desire to value and respect them as students in her classroom with her desire to be their friend. She said middle schoolers sometimes have a hard time distinguishing that. She went on to state,

I think especially at this point in the year, halfway through the year, I think that they [students] would say that . . . I think they would say I care and have respect for them. I think they would. That's hard. This is a hard question. They're learning, and my job is to teach them, and that is

something that I remind myself every day. So, I'm not here to be their friend; I'm not here to listen to their rumor mill. But I absolutely want them to know they are valued and respected. (Participant 1, 2016)

Another teacher stated that he made a conscious choice to respect his students by listening to them. He said it was critical that he showed respect to his students by recognizing that what they had to say was important. He insisted that if he did not show his students that he valued and respected them, they had no incentive to value or respect what he had to say to them. He stated, "It's not like the good old days people seem to like talking about when kids are to be seen and not heard" (Participant 2, 2016). He went on to explain that more by stating,

I'm not trying to play politician, but I try to sincerely listen when they're [students are] talking to me. Don't get me wrong, I don't let them just tell me about their day all the time. I don't let them interrupt class and share all their thoughts and their likes and their dislikes, but if a kid comes up to me and wants to share something with me outside of class, I sincerely listen. I try to hold an actual conversation like I would with an adult, a person that I care about, because we've all been to that point where we might not have something valuable to say, but just having someone there listening completely changes how we feel about ourselves, I think our self-confidence and our self-worth. My goal is not to be a confidant but show them that they matter. They need to know this, and they need to experience this so they know what it feels like to be respected. Respect

isn't given; it's earned. That is especially true with middle school kids.

(Participant 2, 2016)

This teacher viewed the role he played in the lives of his students as vital. To him, teachers must act proactively in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with their students.

Students should feel valued and accepted while they overcome obstacles personally and academically. All three teachers interviewed spoke about their desire to help their students feel valued and accepted even when they had let the teachers or themselves down. Each noted that middle school was a learning stage for students and that students needed to be able to fail both academically and personally and know that failure is a part of life and would happen often over the course of their lifetimes. One teacher noted that he taught his students to accept failure and to learn and grow from it. He said, "I tell my students that if they are not failing, they are not trying, and if you don't want to try, I don't want you to complain about all the opportunities you missed" (Participant 2, 2016). He went on to say that he noticed his students did not try, because they were afraid of disappointing him or themselves or, even worse, actually being successful. He noted,

I think giving them [students] a space where it's okay to make mistakes and give them corrections that are not personal, that personal aspect of it like, "I'm not a bad person; I'm not a stupid person. I made a mistake, and you make them." You'll make 50,000 before you can do this correctly,

consistently. Just trying to cultivate that kind of a culture where you're a person. You don't need to put on airs and bells and whistles to impress me right now or to appease me right now. Just be yourself as long as you're trying. (Participant 2, 2016)

This participant also stated,

I truly believe—I want to and I think I truly do believe—that no one wakes up in the morning and wants to be bad. No one wakes up and says, “I hope the world sees me as mediocre.” No one says, “When I show up today, I want everyone to look down on me.” I don't think anyone wakes up feeling that. It's a sad state of someone who's been brought to that place. I think truly I want to believe in the good in people, especially in kids. I think they want it too. If they lack motivation, which is entirely possible and a reality for the most part, I don't think it's intrinsic. I don't think it's their choice; I think it's the circumstances in their life [that] guide that. I think when you're worried about whether or not you get to eat for the second day in a row, I don't think you give two shits about what your history teacher or your elective teacher says. You're not worried about running the mile; you're just trying to stay conscious at that point. Or “we don't have running water; I haven't bathed in however long.” You're self-conscious about that or whatever it may be. I just want them to know that this is not permanent, and I know that from personal experience. I hope

they know I'm with them through it all; I'm there for them. (Participant 2, 2016)

Reaching a level where the students felt comfortable and safe enough to risk failure and still sought out the teacher was an important feature to building positive teacher-student relationships for these teachers. The participant teachers mentioned that they believed how they conveyed to their at-risk students that they were valued, despite any obstacles, personally or academically, was a critical component in how the students thought of themselves and applied meaning to how they perceived the teachers, by extension, thought of them. One teacher stated that when her struggling students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who had given up on their academics, began to reengage, she knew she was demonstrating to them how important they were despite their disadvantages. She declared,

Maybe obviously . . . checking in on them, but really sort of just letting them know, "Come see me, come see me". Having them seek you, getting out of their seat, raising their hand, and having them come to you I think is huge. That takes a long time to get there. (Participant 3, 2016)

This participant said that although she always checked in on these students by seeking them out, it was when they sought her that she believed true self-empowerment for the students was being achieved.

Theme 5: Overcoming Disengagement to Reach Struggling Students. An in-depth review of the interviews and analysis of the formulated meanings and

significant statements resulted in the fifth theme, overcoming disengagement to reach struggling students. This theme was derived from all three teacher interviews. Table 7 represents the findings for Theme 5. The discussion of the findings for Theme 5 is organized by the formulated meanings that emerged from the interviews. Significant statements that supported the identified formulated meanings and described the teachers' experiences follow each formulated meaning.

Table 7

*Significant Statement and Formulated Meaning Examples of Theme 5:
Overcoming Disengagement to Reach Struggling Students*

| Significant statement | Formulated meaning |
|--|--|
| That's easy. I can deal with angry, I can deal with smarmy, I can deal with "this is too easy for me," but when you have a kid who's just like, "I don't care" and then you're looking at them and you're like, "Yeah, and I know part of your back story, so I know why you don't care." This is the very last thing that you would even . . . That's hard. That's hard with people. "I just stopped caring. This is not important to me. Doesn't have anything to do with me. I can't do it." There's so many things tied up into that. Last year was one of the most apathetic students I've ever had. Even after multiple conversations, it may have been a personal thing, but he was like, "I don't care." . . . He never shook it, not in this classroom. (Participant 1, 2016) | Do not know what to do with "I don't care" |
| Some of them [at-risk students] somehow have been given this tiny little gift of realizing, "I | Doing well or looking good |

don't want to be that. I don't want to go on like that. I want to do something different." (Participant 1, 2016)

Do not know what to do with "I don't care." A common denominator among all three of the teachers interviewed was not knowing what to do with students who conveyed a demeanor of not caring about their classwork, the class, or the overall school environment. All three of the teachers interviewed identified these particular students as those with dynamics that usually included issues that were long-standing and personal in nature. One teacher stated that she continually tried everything in her power to engage these particular students. When asked if these students would be considered at risk of school failure, she nodded in agreement. When asked to describe an at-risk student, she stated, "Disruptive, distracted. Stereotypically, the kid with no backpack, the kid who turns in stuff late or not at all. That's what we think. Those are the things when they walk in our room we just notice" (Participant 1, 2016). She further described students identified as at risk as follows:

Clearly, you expect that there's so many other at-risk students that don't have all of those red flags in our face, because there's the kids too that have the look, but they're going home to messy households and no one paying attention or perhaps no one at home at all and maybe no dinner waiting and maybe no breakfast in the morning and an at risk, which means any external factor that's working against you. Maybe internal

factors too of course, but factors working against you from preventing you from doing the things that you're trying to do. (Participant 1, 2016)

The same teacher went on to describe her frustrations with a particular student she had in the past school year who was identified as at promise. She recalled, "You go from anger to begging. I was just striving for anything. Finally, I said to him, 'What can I possibly do to get you to engage with this?' I didn't win that one. I don't know" (Participant 1, 2016). This particular teacher also spoke of trying to look at learning from the perspective of students she considered at promise by placing herself in their shoes. She processed it this way:

I'm trying to learn. What would stop me from learning? I'm tired, I'm hungry, I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm lonely, I'm confused, I'm unable. I have a disability of some sort. Then you want me to do math or a science project. (Participant 1, 2016)

In addition to being a teacher of at-promise students, this participant included a personal statement in her interview about her experience with a family member whom she would consider at promise. She stated,

My cousin was an at-risk student. She had every single check mark working against her from her home life: no food, no money, no clothes, no showers, no one sober enough to pay attention to what she was doing. She's working on her third master's degree. She knew at some point, somehow, somewhere, from somebody, "I'm not going to be that." I don't know who it was. It wasn't her mom and dad. I don't know. I'd love to

ask her. Was it a teacher? Was it a friend? But something in her sparked, “No, I’m not doing this.” She is well-educated and well-paid. She came from a messy situation, but she did it. (Participant 1, 2016)

When asked what type of student he found most difficult to work with, one teacher stated,

I see the most difficult students as the ones that don’t want it for themselves. They don’t know what they want, and they’re just floating and existing. I can work with kids who . . . they need to desire something; they need to have some kind of motivation. The kids I can’t seem to reach are the ones that are apathetic to just everything. Like, if they want success in some area of life, I can draw them in. I can draw a parallel; I can at least show them that how we go about perfecting this craft can translate into another area, but if they just don’t care for whatever reason, it’s really hard to make a person care about anything. You can’t really make someone care. (Participant 2, 2016)

This participant went on to explain that his deep-rooted frustration with students identified as at promise was grounded more in what he saw as his own deficiencies as a teacher over the students’ lack of care:

As I get older, it’s not as much of an issue, but I still take it personally, like clearly I’m doing something, or I’m not doing something that I should be. I’m not having an impact at all; I’m not able to guide this person in any direction. To me, I think in my weakness I still take that personally, and I

don't know necessarily how to handle it, so that's where I find the difficult students. It's not the ones that lash out in class or act out. That's easy to deal with; you just curb that energy. (Participant 2, 2016)

He concluded by saying,

I mean, it's not easy; I'm not saying it's something I look forward to, but I think I've figured out more or less how to at least turn that energy into something positive, misdirect it, rather than having nothing to work with. It's very easy to turn an ugly block of marble into a sculpture if you have the patience and the time and the direction, but you can't take dust and turn it into a statue no matter how much you try. The students that just don't have the will, you can't sculpt that. You can't shave off the bad and leave the rest. You can't do anything with it. That for me, personally, is what's hard. (Participant 2, 2016)

One teacher who was interviewed stated her most difficult students were usually the ones who came from challenging backgrounds. She said, "It is difficult for me to reach them because they are always saying they don't care, and how do you reach 'I don't care'" (Participant 3, 2016). She went on to say that how she tried to get her students to care was by showing them how their learning was connected to their real lives. She stated,

I think that's a big responsibility on math teachers to teach them [students] that value, like "You'll use this when you're this old; you'll use this when you do this. You want that job? You're going to use this kind of math."

When we do percentages and stuff, or finding tasks and finding tip, and these kids have no clue how to do it because it's four steps, I'm like, "This is real-life math. You go out to dinner, you need to know how to do this math." (Participant 3, 2016)

This participant went on to say,

When home is challenging, when home is not safe, when home is not stable, then they [students] come here and they wreak havoc. Probably maybe they have to be stable at home, and they're tired of being stable, so they come here and then they act differently. Maybe it's just everything's chaotic, so it's just a reaction; it's just their mental state that they're in because everything's so wild and crazy at home, or they've witnessed things that no child should see. They don't know how to process that; they don't know how to think. How do you go home to a house where things are crazy, or there's yelling, or there's shouting, or there's drugs, or there's all sorts of abuse like verbal or physical abuse, and then how do you turn that off so you can come to school to learn? (Participant 3, 2016)

Another teacher concluded,

I think a lot of at-risk kids you see, it does go back to their home and the stuff that they're witnessing at home, if it's that same kind of guideline; if it's not stable and it's not safe, then they are usually at risk as well—at risk meaning failing, not graduating high school, becoming a teen parent, all

kinds of that stuff. Some of that does happen in good homes. You have teen parents in good homes, you have kids that don't want As and Bs and don't care in good homes. You have kids where every privilege has been taken away. I think most students who are at risk do lack a motivation to succeed in school. I think that kind of comes from them not believing in themselves, but also maybe all they have ever known is failure, so they don't know; they just stop trying. (Participant 1, 2016)

This participant concluded by stating that so many of her students just did not believe in themselves and that was the root of so many other things, and teaching them that there was a connection between school and their outside world was a vital part of teaching.

Doing well or looking good. All three teachers interviewed described experiences with their at-risk students who struggled with the positive accolades and affirmations they received from their teachers for doing well in school. One teacher described the circumstance as follows:

Unfortunately for some of these poor kids, they don't want to do well because that doesn't look good. Some of these kids can't handle the accolades. They can't handle the pressure of doing well, and especially in some cultures, that's frowned upon. "You're going to go be successful at school? That's who you're going to be?" That's the kiss of death for some of these kids. We talk about honoring and acknowledging, and some of

them, that's the last thing they want. "Do not point out in front of my peers that I turned something in or that I did well." (Participant 1, 2016)

Another teacher described this same occurrence:

I also think praising them [students] for every single tiny thing that they do is good. It could be a sticker, it could be a treat, it could be a hug, it could just be a high five—I mean, whatever it is—and some praise goes a long way. Some of these kids don't get that sort of positive attention for the stuff that they do. They get attention for negative behavior. Some kids love it, and some kids can also kind of shy away from it. It can feel unfamiliar; it can feel weird. Some just feel uncomfortable being praised, and they don't want their peer group to know that they are doing well in school. (Participant 3, 2016)

This occurrence was complex for both students and teachers. Each participant teacher acknowledged a desire to be cognizant of the boundaries his or her students established as they struggled to accept the praise the teacher may have offered in both a private and public setting. Where praise may have seemed the obvious indicator of acceptance and approval for many students, these teachers described a paradoxical effect of praise on some of their students who had been systematically reduced to the risks they may bring to their school community. One teacher stated that when she began to praise one of her at-risk students for his hard work and for earning top grades, immediately there was a shift:

He's not even disrespectful to me personally, but he's absolutely disrespectful to the classroom environment and learning. He is constantly playing with his hair or playing with rubber bands or anything that he can do to distract other students. I don't take it personally. My guess is that he is like that in every classroom. I really think it's a sign for him; it is just maturity. He just isn't that mature yet. Hopefully it'll kick in for his sake. Hopefully it'll kick in one day. (Participant 1, 2016)

In part, this teacher viewed this particular student's reaction to the praise she had given him both privately and publicly as a sign of a lack of maturity. However, when this teacher was asked what other factors might account for this student's negative reaction to praise other than a lack of maturity, she stated, "Maybe internal factors too of course, but there are clearly a lot of external factors working against you [him] and preventing you [him] from doing the things that you're [he is] trying to do" (Participant 1, 2016).

The only thing teachers, as educational leaders in K-12 public education, have complete control over is the environment they create in their classrooms. The teachers who were interviewed for this study attempted to create environments that were conducive to the learning and growth of disadvantaged students.

Essence of the Teacher Relationship With At-Promise Students

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how teachers in a secondary school setting within the Inland Empire in Southern California describe their relationship experiences with their at-promise students. The teachers, overall, reported positive experiences in their relationships with their at-promise students. All three of the teacher participants worked together at the same school site and had some of the same students in common. All of the interviews were held at the teachers' work site in the individual teachers' respective classrooms.

The attempt to empathize with their at-promise students was a prevailing concept that was consistent across all three of the teachers' interviews. Moreover, by viewing their roles in the classroom as connected to the future life outcomes for their students, all three teachers identified with the desire to positively impact their students. The number one way in which they chose to demonstrate that understanding was by providing a type of care to their students that focused on intentional attempts to make the students feel welcomed in their classrooms, along with creating purposeful opportunities through actions and conversations for the students to know they were respected. This form of care was also compared to a sincere desire to offer a type of parental care that ranged from verbal affirmations, hugs, and high-fives to supporting the students by acting as their representatives when situations occurred that put the students at odds with other adults in their school community.

Similarly, the teachers overwhelmingly rooted parts of their teaching pedagogy in practices that created a classroom atmosphere for students to witness positive role modeling and be exposed to content that served as a potential source of inspiration for the students. Additionally, these teachers all promoted the idea that although at-risk students faced challenges in both their personal lives and within their school community, the safe and nurturing environment the teachers created was a necessary component to their ability to engage the students in the content they instructed.

Finally, the participant teachers struggled with their relationships with at-risk students whom they felt they could not reach due to their lack of motivation and high levels of apathy. The teachers reported understanding why students would have this disposition due to circumstances beyond their control. However, it reduced the teachers' confidence in their own ability to teach their students or get them to improve over the course of the school year.

Summary

Chapter Four provided a detailed description of the findings of the study. The findings were based on the three teacher participants' interviews. The interview questions were designed to capture the experiences of all three of the secondary teachers as they described and defined their relationships with their at-risk students (see Appendix C). The three participants of the study had a combined teaching experience of 21 years. Based on the phenomenological

analysis described by Moustakas (1994), the data were analyzed utilizing the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This method consisted of seven steps: my personal experience, horizontalization, significant statements, similar significant statements using clusters, textual description, structural description, and a composite description. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to reveal significant statements, themes, and the textual description of what the participants experienced. Formulated meanings were constructed based on the myriad perspectives and various roles of the participants in relation to the meaning, context, and setting around the phenomenon. Additional findings are the structural descriptions that detailed how the participants described their relationship experiences with at-promise students. Five themes emerged from this process, and they were as follows: targeting and providing intentional acts of care to students, developing reciprocal trust as a means of connection, the need for teachers to be role models and to be inspirational, the need for teachers to respect and recognize students, and overcoming disengagement to reach struggling students. Finally, the essence of the teachers' relationships with at-promise students was described.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Five provides a brief overview of the study's findings, recommendations for educational leaders, next steps for educational reform, recommendations for future research, and limitations of the study. Chapter Five concludes with a brief discussion of the problem that was identified in the study, the purpose of the study, and how they link to the results and recommendations of the study.

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how teachers in a secondary school setting within the Inland Empire in Southern California describe their relationship experiences with their at-promise students. The research question that guided this study was, "How do secondary teachers in a middle school setting describe their experiences in building relationships with students identified as at promise?" The research question was addressed through the formation of the essence of the teachers' relationships with their at-promise students. Teachers stated their attempt to empathize with their at-promise students was a prevailing intention that helped to foster caring teacher-student relationships. Moreover, all three teachers identified a desire to

positively impact their students by viewing their roles in the classroom as connected to the future life outcomes for their students.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

This study's findings are consistent with the research detailed in the review of literature found in Chapter Two. Federal and state educational reform mandates have begun to require school districts to address student achievement by targeting students who have traditionally come from marginalized or disadvantaged communities (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Through the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), school districts must create, maintain, review, and revise a strategic plan that addresses student groups who have disengaged from the process of schooling, presented maladaptive behavior, or consistently underperformed on academic performance matrices (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

Although there is little debate in the research among educational leaders about the recognition of obstacles and challenges for certain student subgroups to attain high levels of academic success, the issue of how to achieve those ends is widely debated. Swadener (1995) stated, "What is particularly troubling and problematic is the degree to which children's race, gender, class, first language, family make-up, and environment all target them for this 'at-risk' label and associated interventions" (p. 25). Focusing on positive teacher-student relationships at the secondary level should be a primary factor in conversations

about educational policies that are meant to positively improve student outcomes for at-risk students (Ginwright, 2010; Godin, 2012; Johnson, 1997; Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995; Pianta et al., 2003; Rodriguez, 2012; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

Theme 1: Targeting and Providing Intentional Acts of Care to Students

Noddings (1995) posited that teacher-student relationships wrought with care not only enhance the engagement and learning experiences of students but also create a school culture of caring that is then extended from the students out into the general society. The results of the interviews with teachers in this study showed a desire to create opportunities within their classrooms that demonstrated they cared for their students. Pianta et al. (2002) stated that the teacher-student relationship is a pivotal experience for children as they learn to interact with the adult world. Educational reform efforts have largely been centered on the premise that in order to positively impact student outcome results, educators must focus on factors that contribute to students' academic failures (Bryk et al., 2015; Valencia, 2012; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

A critical component to building a positive relational exchange between teachers and students is for teachers to intentionally recognize students' contributions to the school environment in such a way that the students feel valued. It takes each and every adult in the school community to stand in the gap for their students and model what forgiveness, acceptance, kindness, faith, and hope look like so that the students too can see and know they can achieve.

A large portion of students who have been categorized as at promise also fall into one or all of the three subgroup populations of English language learners, foster care youth, and low-income students targeted by the state of California for extra support. Schools have been entrusted with the authority of educating all students with the same zeal and motivation.

This study's findings suggest that only viewing student successes in terms of their failures is a myopic view of student achievement. The deficit model postulates that at-promise students lack the cognitive ability to fully achieve academically and, coupled with maladaptive behavior and a lack of motivation for learning, show little promise of being able to overcome perceived deficiencies associated with the class, culture, or family to which they belong. This view serves to explain low achievement by students from disadvantaged backgrounds by placing the onus for lack of achievement on the disadvantaged students and their families. Educators who hold mental models about students rooted in deficit thinking severely hinder their ability to serve as effective change agents in the lives of at-promise children and youth. Positive teacher-student relationships cannot function at a deficit, and teachers must use a lens of pedagogical recognition by positioning themselves to intentionally provide opportunities to teach students how to advocate for themselves. Cozolino (2014) held that, "Students appear to see their academic abilities through their teachers' eyes, working up or down to the level of their teachers' expectations of them" (p. 150). As one teacher in this study stated,

My job is to teach, and I teach English, so there is always that. However, teaching English is almost secondary to what I think is my responsibility in the classroom. English is almost secondary. My purpose here, and I believe it is anyway, is that I am trying my best to get these children to find a way to believe in themselves and to equip themselves with what they need to be better people and better students. (Participant 1, 2016)

Students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and persistently fail often exhibit other correlating negative factors such as low self-concept, lack of engagement, self-defeating attitudes, and anxiety (Cozolino, 2014). All three of the teacher participants of this study made statements about their at-risk students that were consistent with deficit discourse. Therefore, educators must persist in their efforts to overcome their own biases and negative assumptions attributed to deficit thinking in order to create a classroom and school environment conducive to optimizing learning and relationship building for the most vulnerable children and youth in the school community.

Education is constantly changing. It is popularly stated that what is cared for is what is measured, and depending on how the measuring is done and who is doing the measuring, the results can be seen as successes or failures. Tyack and Cuban (1995) stated, "Conversation about schools is one way that Americans make sense of their lives" (p. 42). If that is true, it may also stand to reason that as society continues to deal with traumatic experiences, such as the impact of drugs on communities (Ginwright, 2010); a lack of trust in local, state,

and federal leaders (Bryk et al., 2015; Espinoza, 2011; Ginwright, 2010); dissolution of families (Ginwright, 2010; Johnson, 1997); and so on, it is no wonder that the uncertainty and anxiety of society is also reflected in the public school system.

As Tyack and Cuban (1995) noted, reform is often in direct conflict with itself:

Americans have wanted schools to serve different and often contradictory purposes for their own children: to socialize them to be obedient, yet to teach them to be critical thinkers; to pass on the best academic knowledge that the past has to offer, yet also to teach marketable and practical skills; to cultivate cooperation, yet to teach students to compete with one another in school and later in life; to stress basic skills but also encourage creativity and higher-order thinking; to focus on the academic basics yet to permit a wide range of choice of courses. (p. 43)

By developing these young people into students with integrity and honor, teachers are also creating students who take pride in their work habits and achievement. Testing data should not drive teaching pedagogy but rather inform it. There should be a strong emphasis on students' ability to have critical thinking skills, experience social and emotional growth, and overcome obstacles and persevere. Student proficiency is often viewed as the teachers' ability to set high standards of achievement and rigor that eventually are measured by the students' displaying academic achievement on standardized tests. The

paradoxical truth is that parents are sending teachers their best students, yet students are still deficient in the skills needed to be considered grade-level proficient as measured by state and national standardized tests.

Students must be taught in meaningful ways that meet their educational need yet move all students along a continuum that demonstrates mastery of content as measured by universal standardized tests. Schools are indeed a reflection of society, and efforts to reinvent schools are often as fleeting as political positions of political office seekers as they bend and shift their core values to the winds of change. Educational leaders have to be cognizant of their ability to target and provide intentional acts of care to students who are most vulnerable in the school community. One teacher from the study said his focus was to provide intentional acts of care to his students, because he linked it to a way of doing things differently in education.

In transcendental phenomenological research, intentionality is viewed as the conscious state of knowing (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I chose to more robustly define intentionality as the ability of the teachers to exercise metacognition in how they create space and to act as change agents in the lives of at-risk youth by encouraging students' ability to heal from trauma and overcome oppression and acts of injustice experienced (Ginwright, 2010). For the teacher mentioned above to accomplish transformative care with his students in education, he had to first build on students' cognitive abilities by investing in his own social and emotional relationship capacity with his students.

Intentionality, therefore, is also the ability of the teachers to “explore, understand, and heal some of their own brokenness before they take charge of a classroom” (Cozolino, 2014, p. 105). To this teacher, positive student learning outcomes were inherent to the teacher-student relationship when intentional acts of care were primary.

The need for educational leaders to provide intentional acts of care to students is even more imperative when it comes to students who are viewed by teachers as negative or problematic due to poor academic performance or maladaptive behavior. Pianta et al. (2002) explained it this way: “Teachers’ representation of relationships (particularly how they process negative emotion and experiences with the child) is related to how the teacher actually behaves with the child” (p. 94). It is important that educators help to foster agency in at-risk students by first seeking to understand the social, political, and economic structures that impact these students. By helping at-risk students recognize their ability to build agency, educators help build capacity in their students that will go far in forming the students’ understanding of their generational past, informing their present, and preparing their future (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012). Therefore, educational leaders who are responsible for teacher preparatory programs should expand on embedded classroom management techniques to include explicit training that deals with how to overcome negative exchanges to their

interactions with students and how to purposefully establish caring relationships with their students.

Educators must advance discourse about the transformative importance and value of positive and caring relationships between educators and students. These relationships must denote the importance of educators' recognizing their students in meaningful ways and especially using the process of education to truly effect change in the trajectories of marginalized and disadvantaged students' lives. It is only through intentional acts by educators that real learning and opportunities will occur and shift students from being viewed in terms of risk to instead being viewed in terms of their promise of success. Knowing that positive, healthy, and authentic caring relationships are beneficial to all students is not enough; systematically planning for how the school and classroom environment will be created to make that success happen regularly is of paramount importance. Elements such as classroom/school culture, educational policies, educator mindset, educator care, and student recognition come together to inform educators' relationships with their students and should be underscored and promoted as part of the day-to-day process of schooling.

Children who struggle in the education system (typically marked by problematic behavior, lack of skills, and low achievement) are more susceptible to negative future student outcomes when the teacher-student relationship is not strong or is marred with negativity (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Therefore, it is critical that educators work to create meaningful opportunities that focus on

building positive relationships with at-risk students. According to Pianta et al. (2002),

Improved relationships between teachers and students can be a focus of intervention efforts and a by-product of other efforts directed at children, teachers, classrooms, or schools. In particular, student-teacher relationships can be improved by targeting the organizational ethos and structure of the school or classroom as well as by targeting social interactions between teachers and children. (p. 98)

Student recognition, school culture, and teacher mindset are a few of the elements that work together to form the ecological system of a school. As one teacher in this study stated, “They [students] want to believe the best in adults. Especially in adults because they want the people in their lives, they want to feel like those people are leading them somewhere great” (Participant 2, 2016). Results of this study suggest that when teachers, as educational leaders, build caring relationships with students that extend beyond academic concerns and into the students’ personal well-being, space is potentially created that allows the teachers to feel as though they are making progress with their students (Ginwright, 2010; Godin, 2012).

Teachers must help create a positive school culture in which students can grow and feel connected. I believe in order to do that, teachers must first build trust with those under their charge. Being a teacher is really about understanding the ability to be a change agent and recognizing how important

one's role is in the lives of children. More than just having formal training in a content area, teachers have to teach the importance of equity and model positivity, mental fortitude, courage, compassion, empathy, and grit. Teachers must understand how their own experiences, belief systems, attitudes, and values shape their identity and deeply influence their ability to build relationships with their students. However, such a level of awareness must be developed through thoughtful reflection. This is critical toward the formation of teacher-student relationships, because as teachers seek to continually understand this about themselves, students too are in the process of figuring out their identities, how they relate to the world, and how the world relates to them.

Teachers, as educational leaders, must challenge one another to be confrontational with their students. I do not suggest being confrontational in an adversarial sense but in a willingness to not paint over, dismiss, or reduce the realities their students are facing as things that are temporary, because at this juncture in their lives, students lack the experience and maturity to think of their circumstances as anything other than permanent. One participant teacher noted that her classroom environment was focused on listening to her students. She said, "Children know when they're not being listened to at almost any age" (Participant 1, 2016). She added, "You can be nurturing and loving and such, but you also must be firm and show that you care and, above all, take the time to listen to what they [students] are saying and not saying" (Participant 1, 2016). In shifting the adverse narrative about the political identity used to categorize at-

promise students, the antipathetic mindset and maligned discourse related to these students in public schools too shall shift (Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010).

One of the greatest gifts a teacher can impart on students is the realization that they can walk in their own truth and that the students are recognized, valued, and cared for in the classroom so that they may, in turn, offer that gift to others.

Theme 2: Developing Reciprocal Trust as a Means of Connection

In addition to the need for teachers to target students and provide intentional acts of care, teachers must form authentic relationships with their students as they are and not for whom they wish them to be (Starratt, 2013). In order for teachers to foster transformative caring relationships, these educational leaders must build reciprocal trust with students that is rooted in connecting to the students in such a way that mutual trust is encouraged. Trust, as a prerequisite to a positive teacher-student relationship, was interwoven into the ecology of the classroom culture of the participants in this study. A recommendation for how to accomplish this begins with the understanding that above the academic pursuits of classroom rigor, trust should act as a living organism within the culture of the classroom. Trust should be constantly affirmed and cultivated between teacher and student. The intentional acts by the participant teachers in this study to treat their students with kindness, respect, and understanding were not based on one-time attempts but were pursued as a recursive measure to connect with their at-promise student populations. One

teacher said that if his students did not trust him, his program would “cease to exist” (Participant 2, 2016).

As a band teacher, this participant stated that his class was an elective in which students chose to participate. He candidly spoke of how he spent the greater part of his day critiquing everything his students did, so if they did not trust him to do so for their own betterment, the students would either choose to stop signing up for his course or cease to want to try while they were in the class. He said he understood why he came to the classroom every day, and it was mainly to live his passion. Federal and state laws are changing to reflect a gradual de-emphasis on high-stakes testing (Bryk et al., 2015; Cabral & Chu, 2013; Godin, 2012; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Although gradual, this shift is necessary to break through current educational cultures that have harvested a general feeling of distrust between all stakeholders within the public K-12 school community. Tyack and Cuban (1995) summarized the conflict of various stakeholders in educational reform efforts by stating,

Innovators proposing or supporting start-from-scratch reforms have usually been people outside the public schools—technocrats, university professors, salespeople with products to push, politicians intent on rapid results before the next elections, foundation officers, and business leaders. Impatient with the glacial pace of incremental reform, free of institutional memories of past shooting star reforms, and sometimes

hoping for quick profits as well as a quick fix, they promised to reinvent education. (p. 111)

As noted above, this distrust has a historical basis and in large part is due to the competing understanding of stakeholders in determining what is best for students in public K-12 education. Federal and state laws that historically tied school district funding to student performance had the added effect of circumventing student groups that did not meet standards or show academic growth (Bryk et al., 2015; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Building trust in any relationship is hard; however, the teacher-student relationship offers additional challenges (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trust is an investment, and it requires time, energy, and effort to yield a profit. In order to grow underperforming students academically, educational leaders must build hope, by way of student agency, back into the strategic plan of addressing how disadvantaged students are viewed (Lopez, 2013). Disadvantaged students must trust that their teachers have their best interests at heart, and teachers have to trust that students are doing the best they can.

Trust-based relationships are difficult to achieve in school environments that do not prioritize the formation of trusting teacher-student relationships. Trusting teacher-student relationships seek to be informed by the difficulties that modern-day students experience as part of their everyday lives. These difficulties can include violence, abuse, and neglect in a student's home life but also include stress factors brought on by the school environment, such as

bullying, pressure from high-stakes testing, or disaster-preparedness practices in case of outside terrorist threats against the school (Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2008; Sanders & Jordan, 2013). As one teacher noted as part of her interview for this study,

You only get to become that student that has all the answers when you raise your hand and you ask for clarification and you ask for help. The boy, I said, “Last year, your grades weren’t that great, and you were kind of quiet, and you were shy, and you were embarrassed to ask for help.” He goes, “Yeah.” I go, “This year, you ask for help all the time.” He goes, “Yeah, in all my classes, I raise my hand,” or he walks up to the teacher because he’s still maybe a little timid to raise his hand and ask in front of the whole class, but he has got enough courage to walk up to the teacher and ask for help. His grades are, I think, mostly As and Bs. He might have one C. He knows that that’s a direct relation to him asking for help. (Participant 3, 2016)

This teacher went on to explain that because of her investment in building a trusting relationship with this student, the student also began to trust in the things she told him about how to best navigate his educational endeavors. Although she reported not seeing any big changes in him during the previous year she had had him, she said based on speaking to his teachers this year, he was doing well, and she believed it was because he had extended the trust that they shared and applied it to his other teachers. She also said that where she

thought this student would have been dismissed or thought of as someone who was “a drain to the classroom” based on his lack of academic concern by these teachers, they had instead commented to her about how they viewed him as a student who wanted to overcome factors that were keeping him from being successful.

Theme 3: The Need for Teachers to Be Role Models and to Be Inspirational

As noted in Theme 2, trust, as a means of connecting to students, is what the participants said directly correlated to their positive teacher-student relationships. The interview participants also stated that trust influenced how the teachers viewed their students. John Quincy Adams is credited with stating, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader” (Pozin, 2014, para. 5). Educational leaders come in various forms; however, true leadership is when one’s actions inspire others. One participant connected the idea of modeling behavior as a type of inspiration that also fostered a sense of agency in his students. He stated,

I think by empowering the children that way [modeling behavior], they start doing the same, and then it also impacts their academics, and they start producing higher quality work just because they feel better about themselves, and they feel like they can believe in what they’re doing.

(Participant 2, 2016)

Humans are relational beings (Starratt, 2013). It is futile to view the role of a teacher as capable of eschewing relationships with students and instead merely

consisting of rote delivery of content (Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002).

Writing about the value of positive role modeling and its impact on children and youth, Cozolino (2014) posited,

Humans have evolved to be highly sensitive to others and there is no doubt that we have the ability to influence the inner states of those around us. As authority figures and surrogate parents, teachers have a direct line to the brains of our students. (p. 137)

All three of the teachers interviewed for this study spoke of the desire to connect to their students in a way that showed positive role modeling as well as to serve as a source of inspiration. One teacher connected his experience of being a teacher to the act of being a role model for his students. He further viewed his role as a teacher as a vehicle to positively influence the lives of his students based on his interaction with them. He stated,

That's human nature; all we know is what we know, as silly as that sounds, so yes, there are kids that lack motivation. No, it's not permanent, but it's hard to get out, but I feel like and I know from personal experience that I have been that for at least one or two. More than that, I know it's more than that. I'm trying to be modest. If you can be that [role model] for a person, not just a kid, they're a person, they can see that there's something beyond the pit that they're stuck in. If they see it and if they've seen someone climb out of it, it becomes a little more real for them. It's almost impossible without it being modeled just by human

nature. Our minds can only comprehend that which we've witnessed, or observed, or lived. Even the most creative people, it's still relative to the world we understand as we understand it, so if their [students'] world is so narrow just by unfortunate circumstance that they only know a very bleak outlook on the world, it's hard for them to apply more of themselves to get out of that, even for themselves, because my parents did it, my grandparents did it, so yes, those kids exist. No, it's not permanent. I think if there's any chance that we can pull them out of it, I think we should. (Participant 2, 2016)

Socializing institutions such as public secondary schools are a platform for educational leaders to effect positive life trajectories in the lives of their students. It is the essence of how to make hope happen toward the future of both the educational leaders and the youth they are leading (Lopez, 2013). Educational leaders are in positions to act as a bridge that links the risks associated with students in their school communities to the promise that lies within them and positively impact their futures. Disadvantaged and marginalized students are reflectors. As educators, our reactions to these students tell us who we are, not who they are. In order for society to extract the things that it wants from an educated population, such as creativity and innovation, there must first be a consolidated effort to instill those ideals (Walsh, 2011) into children and youth. Classroom teachers and other adults with regular interactions with students in schools are able to behave in ways that allow students to actively observe

positive role modeling and, in turn, learn from those observations and mimic those behaviors as part of the maturation and socializing process of schooling (Cozolino, 2014).

This process does not occur in a vacuum, nor should it be reduced to academic content. All students should have educational experiences that inspire them, and this is especially true for those who have been defined by their school communities based on their risk factors instead of their promising educational and future life factors. As one teacher expressed in her interview for this study,

We watch inspirational talks in class, and I expose them [students] to all different kinds of inspirational talks. Sometimes it's athletes, and sometimes it's scientists, and sometimes it's a singer, and we do thoughts of the day where I talk to them about stuff that's not English. Like the other day, we did one where "your life is either . . ." The question was, "Is life an ocean or a ball of clay? Is it something where you're floating in the middle, and it's controlling everything for you, or it's a ball of clay that's completely malleable and you're forming?" The lesson was life is both, and some days we float with the tide, and we let life take us, and sometimes we pick up the ball of clay, and we make things that we want, but we have to be careful what we make, and they loved it, and there were these . . . I'm always trying to come at them from different angles . . . because they all have different things that they're interested in. If I only taught them about authors, great, I've got 12% of them that are with me,

but I have to talk to them about all kinds of things. We watched a basketball video the other day, and you have athletes on the screen, and then all of a sudden you have another 27% [of students] that are like, “Wait, who’s that?” Yeah, I hope. I hope I’m constantly trying to come at them from some unexpected angle. (Participant 1, 2016)

In order to transform thinking that transforms learning and future outcomes for at-risk students in public school classrooms, educational leaders have to work to go beyond the routine of delivering day-to-day academic content and instead seek to engage today’s learners by creating a classroom and school culture that inspires their students (Godin, 2012). The literature reiterates that teachers in the public school setting cannot control which students enroll at their school sites. Other uncontrollable factors include how grade proficient students are upon entering a new grade; if they come from traumatic home experiences marred with violence; if they come from families designated as low income or impoverished; if they belong to homes with sexual, mental, or physical abuse; and immutable student characteristics of race and gender (Ginwright, 2010).

The only thing teachers, as educational leaders in K-12 public education, have complete control over is the environment they create in their classrooms (Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The classroom environment must be conducive to the learning and growth of disadvantaged students (Bryk et al., 2015; Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Without sincere efforts to establish teacher-student relationships within the classroom and school cultures

that are supported by radical care and recognition, secondary schools will remain a place where students' hopes and dreams die (Godin, 2012; Lopez, 2013). The role teachers play in the lives of students is vital. The educational leader who acts as a role model or inspires his or her students is able to leverage himself or herself in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with students (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). This is one of the most important dynamics children or youth experience as part of the schooling process. One teacher in this study stated,

I did not even know I was achieving it [playing a vital role in the lives of his students], but somehow I did, and I do intentionally try to inspire my students, and they are better for it, and I am a better teacher for it too.

(Participant 2, 2016)

He went on to say, "I've always been told middle school is not a good time of life, and it wasn't for me, but that is why it is so imperative to be inspiring to these kids" (Participant 2, 2016). He concluded by saying, "I've had so many students give me letters and come back and just say that they wish they were back" (Participant 2, 2016).

Theme 4: The Need for Teachers to Respect and Recognize Students

Establishing trust-based relationships with students, rooted in respect and recognition of the students, proved to be pivotal toward the ability of the teachers in this study to build positive teacher-student relationships with their students. Current research in neuroscience has shown a causal relationship between

recognition and its effect on trust (Zak, 2017). It is critical that educational leaders work to achieve positive trust-based relationships with their students. These relationships must leave students with a genuine feeling that they are valued and needed in the classroom and in the greater school community. There is an African proverb that I will paraphrase to relate the significance of teachers' respecting and recognizing students who are typically marginalized by their school communities: If the youth are not initiated into the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth (Walsh, 2011).

This African proverb accurately reflects the current dismal state of the schooling process for those students who have been outcast or disenfranchised. One participant teacher insisted that if he did not show his students that he valued and respected them, they had no incentive to value or respect what he had to say to them. He went on to more robustly describe his thought process as follows:

I'm not trying to play politician, but I try to sincerely listen when they're [students are] talking to me. Don't get me wrong, I don't let them just tell me about their day all the time. I don't let them interrupt class and share all their thoughts and their likes and their dislikes, but if a kid comes up to me and wants to share something with me outside of class, I sincerely listen. I try to hold an actual conversation like I would with an adult, a person that I care about, because we've all been to that point where we might not have something valuable to say, but just having someone there

listening completely changes how we feel about ourselves, I think our self-confidence and our self-worth. My goal is not to be a confidant but show them that they matter. They need to know this, and they need to experience this so they know what it feels like to be respected. Respect isn't given; it's earned. That is especially true with middle school kids.

(Participant 2, 2016)

This teacher viewed the role he played in the lives of his students as vital. To him, teachers must act proactively in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with their students.

Educational leaders should continually work to provide space for students through the framework of recognition in order for students to have a sense of belonging within their school environment. This sense of belonging will only come when educational leaders view their purpose in schools as more than proprietors of content. Educational leaders should also be cognizant of their role to intentionally inform the identities of students who are at risk of not living up to their promise by showing them their value to the educational community and the greater society. It should not be assumed that teacher-student relationships are carried out in caring and purposeful ways that bring acceptance, consciousness, and promotion of positive self-identity for the at-risk students. This sense of value and belonging is achieved through the intentional act of recognizing and respecting the cultural differences and value systems that each student brings to the school's ecological system through the lens of recognition. In doing so,

educational leaders are connecting to students on a level that recognizes their shared humanity and maximizes the empathetic capacity between the teachers and students in positive relationship building. One teacher interviewed for this study talked about how she used humor to connect to her students and recognize them in ways that she believed made them feel valued and recognized by her. She stated,

Maybe I'll take 5 minutes of the period to have a discussion about whatever they [students] feel like, maybe throw in some jokes in here and there, making people laugh, because not everything we learn is fun, but I think throwing in some humor here and there will make them want to show up. . . . Who knows what that crazy teacher's going to say? Sometimes it's like using their own language, their goofy language, whatever is their slang, back at them will usually get them because they'll be like, "Oh, she just said—oh, she took your slang!" It was actually in a disciplined way, like I just called you out on your bologna, but I did it in a middle school way. Sometimes that can reach to them more than using your fancy old adult words. (Participant 3, 2016)

Rodriguez (2008) stated, "Apathetic adults often expect academically and socially marginal students to care about school, when school adults themselves fail to relay authentic forms of caring to students" (p. 439). Recognition for the students by teachers and other adults in the school environment becomes the paramount feature for all students characterized as at promise. Recognition for

students of color and those from low-income families is especially important, because, while some students are recognized for their contribution to the schooling environment, these groups have historically not had their voices heard in meaningful ways that honor their existence and individuality in equivalent ways (Rodriguez, 2008). One participant teacher described how he honored the voices of his students:

Just trying to cultivate that kind of a culture where you're a person. You don't need to put on airs and bells and whistles to impress me right now or to appease me right now. Just be yourself as long as you're trying.

(Participant 2, 2016)

He also stated,

I truly believe—I want to and I think I truly do believe—that no one wakes up in the morning and wants to be bad. No one wakes up and says, “I hope the world sees me as mediocre.” No one says, “When I show up today, I want everyone to look down on me.” I don't think anyone wakes up feeling that. It's a sad state of someone who's been brought to that place. I think truly I want to believe in the good in people, especially in kids. I think they want it too. If they lack motivation, which is entirely possible and a reality for the most part, I don't think it's intrinsic. I don't think it's their choice; I think it's the circumstances in their life [that] guide that. I think when you're worried about whether or not you get to eat for the second day in a row, I don't think you give two shits about what your

history teacher or your elective teacher says. You're not worried about running the mile; you're just trying to stay conscious at that point. Or "we don't have running water; I haven't bathed in however long." You're self-conscious about that or whatever it may be. I just want them to know that this is not permanent, and I know that from personal experience. I hope they know I'm with them through it all; I'm there for them. (Participant 2, 2016)

There are numerous ways to recognize students in the context of schooling. Teachers demonstrate the ability to "see" their students by speaking with them regularly and emphasizing their academic achievement and personal well-being (Rodriguez, 2008, 2012). Recognition of students by teachers and other adults in schools must be illustrated through setting goals and high expectations for students that challenge them to persevere in academic pursuits and through personal trials. This study reinforces the need for educators to be cognizant of the needs of students to be recognized in meaningful ways. Educational leaders should be trained in the five methods of practice detailed in the pedagogy of recognition by Rodriguez (2012) and explained in great detail in Chapter Two of this research study.

Through this framework, "recognition has the potential to challenge educators to reflect on the human side of policy compliance and institutional practices, particularly among practitioners and other stakeholders responsible for serving youth" (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 8). Educational conversations about

students from marginalized communities are largely nonexistent as they relate to raising consciousness and positive identity for this vulnerable class of students (Franklin, 2013). The five methods described in the pedagogy of recognition are as follows: curricular recognition, contextualizing recognition, pedagogical recognition, transformative recognition, and relational recognition. In various ways, as noted in Chapter Four of this research study, the participant teachers described aspects of these five methods in their responses.

Curricular recognition is framed as the ability of schools to affirm marginalized students through content (Rodriguez, 2012). This lens of recognition seeks to describe the need for educators to position themselves as actors with agency who seek to incorporate and situate culturally relevant pedagogy by way of scholarly learning for the purpose of equalizing deficit-oriented ideologies about the historical contributions from people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). Recognition of students through this lens will help to affirm and validate the cultural contributions and experiences of marginalized students as they matriculate through the K-12 educational system. The contextualizing lens of recognition allows educators to extend the meaning of schooling beyond a strict classroom context to an understanding that seeks to explain external forces. These external forces are identified as political, social, and economic conditions that affect students' ability to engage and have opportunities in society at large (Rodriguez, 2012).

Pedagogical recognition takes into consideration ways in which classroom teachers can position themselves as agents who intentionally seek opportunities to teach students how to advocate for themselves (Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). Pedagogical recognition also seeks to reconstruct the traditionally negative identities that have served to belittle, demean, and malign this population of students (Rodriguez, 2012). The lens of transformative recognition allows educational leaders to examine how the school setting can work in tandem with the larger society to positively transform the lives of students. Through the transformative lens, marginalized students do not have their political or social identity limited to scores on a standardized test but instead are “academically competitive to excel in challenging situations, and must be equipped with critical skills to connect their realities with the larger influences of school, community, and society for self-determination” (Rodriguez, 2012, p. 23).

Relational recognition encourages the practice of educators to purposefully seek out ways to acknowledge their students through simple acts of humanity (Rodriguez, 2012). These gestures can include greeting students at the door as they walk into a classroom or intentionally calling them by name and waving when they are noticed around the school campus. Relational recognition prompts educators to examine the context in which they see their at-risk students.

Theme 5: Overcoming Disengagement to Reach Struggling Students

There are myriad things that go into influencing the identity of all people; however, at-risk students' perception of self is significantly shaped by their experiences in the schooling continuum. At-risk students viewed by the schooling system through the lens of recognition will find it easier to overcome their reticence and doubts and take measures to call on teachers and other adults in the school community who are so perfectly situated in schools to assist them. Today's students bring in a wealth of various cultural experiences and backgrounds that can and should be leveraged to their benefit and not to their detriment. True positive teacher-student relationship building, especially with students identified as at risk in educational literature, seeks to value the cultural capital students bring to the learning environment and places a responsibility on the teacher to honor and respect the norms and values that have gone into shaping students (Yosso, 2005).

This research inquiry was multifaceted. It detailed elements (see Chapter Two) and levels of teacher care for students; ways in which teachers could recognize students in meaningful ways; and the importance of classroom and school culture, teacher mindset, and current legislation specifically designed to account for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The organization of this study was multifaceted, because the needs of students are multifaceted, and the whole child must be viewed through several lenses grounded in a critical consciousness that sees at-risk students for who their

future selves can be and not just their current life realities. My own educational journey was largely constructed by the experiences I had with my teachers and other adults in my schooling process. All students, but especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, need teachers to be a source of positivity and encouragement in their lives.

Next Steps for Educational Reform

Tyack and Cuban (1995) recognized that although schools are indeed vastly different from generations past, public schools, as socializing institutions, are by far the best they have ever been:

The public schools, for all their faults, remain one of our most stable and effective public institutions—indeed, given the increase in social pathologies in the society, educators have done far better in the last generation than might have been expected. At the same time, it is clear that public schools need to do a better job of teaching students to think, not just in order to (supposedly) rescue an ailing economy but to serve broad civic purposes as well. (p. 38)

In 2013, California Governor Brown called for sweeping reform in education through school finance by handing power back to local school districts to make decisions based on the needs of students (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). Through the LCAP, school districts are charged with engaging stakeholders, who are defined as parents, certificated and classified union workers, community

members, students, the school board, and school district leadership, to establish and set forth short- and long-term goals that match local needs and fulfill state educational priorities (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). California policymakers, through this legislation, made a bold declaration about their desire to address the needs of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Accountability measures imposed by the state and federal government prescribing how schools should prepare students at key points along the schooling continuum are of little consequence if educational leaders fail to grapple with the reality that students do not care what they are being taught until they know that they are first being cared for (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Godin, 2012; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014). One participant teacher in this study stated it this way:

I think it depends on the kid. I think they're going to give us what they feel like giving until they know. They don't care how much we know as teachers until they know how much we care. That's kind of corny, but it's true. I feel like they're not going to try until they know that we're laying it on the line for them, but then they will. (Participant 2, 2016)

The importance of school culture is also highlighted in the state of California's educational policy through the LCAP. The California Department of Education has created an advisory panel that makes recommendations to the State Board of Education for the purposes of quantifying nearly all things that affect schools that are not academic (Adams, 2017). Nonacademic factors such

as values, expectations, inclusivity, supportiveness, sense of belonging to school community, and the overall sense of emotional, social, and physical safety are all areas addressed by the panel (Adams, 2017).

True educational reform begins and ends with the teacher-student relationship. The teacher-student relationship is multidimensional and fluid (Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2003; Pianta et al., 2002). This research study focused on the complex dynamic of the teacher-student relationship. It also sought to capture the essence of the teachers' experiences, as they described them, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This research investigation connected the important role teachers play in the lives of their students, teacher mindset about at-promise student success, and how strong and positive teacher-student relationships have the potential to encourage agency in at-promise students through meaningful recognition of their promise for academic success over their presupposed risks.

It is my belief that the education system will be improved through the recent legislative actions in California; however, true educational reform should center on the overall success of the whole child as he or she matriculates through the K-12 public schooling process. Educational reform efforts should address the social and emotional needs of students by training teachers and other educational leaders within the school community in methods. Therefore, it is recommended that educators undergo training such as that outlined here that specifically targets those areas. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (n.d.)

features a multiyear, multifaceted, evidence-based approach to training educators in social and emotional intelligence to integrate in schools through its program known as RULER. The acronym RULER stands for “Recognizing emotions in self and others[;] Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions[;] Labeling emotions accurately[;] Expressing emotions appropriately[; and] Regulating emotions effectively” (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, n.d., para. 1). Engaging educators in learning how to create supportive and caring school cultures through teaching emotional intelligence skills to students and adults is the type of educational reform that positively reverberates throughout the lives of students.

Understanding how students process emotions was invaluable to one participant teacher when she spoke about an experience she had had with one particular student who was also her next-door neighbor. She thought her student had had it rough because his grandmother had custody and ran a daycare out of the home. She went on to state that his parents, although alive, were mostly absent from his life. The teacher said she felt a need to show the student, through how she treated him and in what she taught him, that there was more to life than his current circumstance. She described her experience in this way:

I hear yelling and shouting all the time at their [the student's] house.

Sometimes I feel like getting to school is important, and that's about it.

Knowing what their grades are, seeing if they're doing their best, and

[seeing] if they are doing homework at home just isn't valued. “I brought

you to school, that's all I need to do." I think sometimes it is so busy at [their] home. There are people in and out of the house all the time; there's people, I mean, sometimes they're with the neighbors, but you see them outside drinking and smoking a lot, probably when the kids should be studying, or even I see the kids playing basketball, or they're in the street. Play is good. Play is super beneficial, but for four hours after school, it might be a little bit excessive when I know that you could've used one of those hours to do homework. (Participant 3, 2016)

This teacher said she often tried to impress upon her students that they could achieve and that their effort and attitude mattered. She concluded,

We do a lot of growth mindset, so that big philosophy of thinking. Your growth mindset, I think, is your attitude. Setting expectations I think is also important to help them [students] achieve their goal. Small goals, big goals, like some that, you know, a goal that maybe they're going to reach during that period for one hour, maybe a goal for the week and a goal for the month and a goal for the school year is good for them to know. (Participant 3, 2016)

The complexities and intricacies that work in tandem to provide the ecological systems of schools for students who experience them are part of an arduous process. Teacher preparatory programs should include in-depth courses that inform prospective teachers about how to reflect on and examine their own personal factors such as temperament, biases, belief systems, and

specific personality traits as they work to help shape their interactions with students and the relationships they will form as a result. It is vital that teachers are instructed on how to enhance the social and emotional skills of students, including how to be reflective and empathetic. However, empathy is not enough. As one participant in this study noted, there was an obligation for him to be the kind of supportive, positive, and relationship-building teacher that he too enjoyed and benefited from as part of his schooling process. He stated,

I feel like I owe it to them [past teachers] because I have had many incredible teachers in my life that didn't have to go the extra mile for me that did. I would not be here if they had not decided, for whatever reason, "We're going to help this kid out." I feel like I need to pay it back/pay it forward. (Participant 2, 2016)

In addition to teachers having a deep understanding of why and how the teacher-student relationship impacts children and youth, it is equally vital that teachers are further trained in how to reflect on their own self-awareness and the invaluable role they hold in the classroom. This level of awareness includes how teachers empower their students through agency, recognition, and providing the tools and resources to calm themselves when conflict arises.

Those invested in educational reform should pay close attention to how students are categorized in their school communities. Framing students as at risk in the school environment perpetuates a negative psychological view of who these students are versus who these students can be. Schools are training

grounds where students are molded and conditioned to view themselves as part of the wider society. Therefore, discourse around students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds should only be rooted in positive recognition of what their promise to succeed is and not the supposed risks they bring to their school and social communities. Burch (2007) noted, “Over the past several decades, education research has demonstrated the importance of human, social, and physical capital in enabling broad-scale reforms in local settings” (p. 91).

Although this study’s findings do not suggest that the participant teachers were aware of the hidden curriculum that is prevalent in schools, educators must be mindful of school cultures that acknowledge the values and cultural norms of some students over others. Educators must seek to create effective school ecological systems that ensure all students are valued, recognized, and accepted for the unique talents, gifts, abilities, values, and customs that they bring to the school environment (Anyon, 1980; Rodriguez, 2008). Understanding that students’ learning conditions stem from the culture that has been established by school leaders and especially the classroom teachers is the first step in achieving a public school system that is equitable and caring for students who come from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should pursue in further detailed studies an effort to inform all stakeholders about critical aspects of teacher-student relationships at

the secondary level with at-promise youth. This study has presented rudimentary layers of understanding around how secondary teachers describe their relationships with their at-promise students. Educational recommendations were made for consideration by schools and school districts as well as policymakers. The need to have mandates that focus specifically on how the parts of the teacher-student relationship come together to impact the way in which teachers teach and the way in which students learn should be at the forefront of all discussions around what is in the best interests of stakeholders in the community of public schools. There are future implications for practitioners and researchers. Suggestions for future research are as follows:

1. Conduct a longitudinal follow-up case study with a cohort of teachers that includes multiple interviews and observations in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers work to build relationships over time with their at-promise students. In this extended version of the study, the researcher will be able to include data that reflect how teachers describe their relationships over time with at-promise students that are inclusive of changing student demographics, district and school dynamics, and federal, state, and local policies as they impact classroom dynamics.
2. Develop an alternative transcendental phenomenological study that focuses on a cohort of at-promise students in secondary schools and includes their voices and documents how they define and describe

their experiences and relationships with their secondary teachers. It would be beneficial for policymakers and practitioners to seek to understand the perspectives of at-promise students as they navigate their way through the secondary public school system.

3. Establish a larger sample of secondary schools from all over the various Southern California school districts, and establish new criteria to explore how administrators describe their relationships with their at-promise students. As schoolwide site leaders, administrators play a key role in establishing and influencing the institutional culture of their school sites. This will be beneficial in adding another layer of understanding and knowledge about experiences of practitioners with at-promise students.

Limitations of Study

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological research method and investigated the shared experiences of three secondary public school teachers as they described their relationships with their at-promise students. Other conditions of the study were that the three teachers all worked within the same school district and at the same school site. Further research can be done to broaden the scope of this research study. There is room for more participants to be involved, including using multiple school sites in several school districts. Another limitation of this study is that it is unknown what resources and trainings

the teachers had to inform their opinions about their relationships with their at-promise students.

Conclusion

There is more to at-promise students than how they have been positioned in the educational literature. Swadener (1995) posed the following questions to ponder about risks associated with students and their families:

Are children and their families the ones who are truly at risk and to blame?

What are the responsibilities of schools and the individuals and groups within them who are perpetuating the classism, racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and other forms of structural, yet ever changing, oppression?

Must families be responsible for getting all children “ready” for schools, or should school be responsible for being “ready” for increasingly diverse and often marginalized children? (p. 32)

This research study did not seek to address how preexisting structural oppression, such as that related to race and class, influences teacher-student relationships. However, it is important to note how structural oppression reverberates throughout the study, if viewed through a linear lens. This is understood as a byproduct of thoughts because thoughts become actions, and actions frame ways of thinking, and ways of thinking produce language, such as the term *at risk*. It is not suggested that a framework for transformative care guarantees an outcome of academic success for at-promise students. This study’s findings, however, do highlight the critical need for teachers to create

intentional opportunities to foster strong teacher-student relationships with at-promise students. This study also encourages students, through their relationships with teachers and schools, to establish educational outlooks from a caring environment that encourages resiliency and promotes agency internally and externally (Noddings, 1995). Booker Taliaferro Washington (1901/1995) stated, “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has to overcome while trying to succeed” (p. 19). As previously stated, it is important to foster agency in at-promise students through the understanding of the social, political, and economic structures that served to impact their generational past, inform their present, and prepare their future (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Franklin, 2013; Ginwright, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012).

The literature reiterates that teachers and other educational leaders in the public school setting cannot control which students enroll at their school sites. Other uncontrollable factors include how grade proficient students are when they come in; if they come from traumatic home experiences marred with violence; if they come from families designated as low income or impoverished; if they belong to homes with sexual, mental, or physical abuse; and immutable student characteristics of race and gender (Ginwright, 2010). The only thing teachers, as educational leaders in K-12 public education, have complete control over is the environment they create in their classrooms (Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The classroom environment must be conducive to the learning and

growth of disadvantaged students (Bryk et al., 2015; Edmonds, 1979; Peterson & Deal, 1998). The alternative is that classrooms and schools will be places where students' hopes and dreams die (Godin, 2012; Lopez, 2013). Polakow (1995) stated, "In such cases, classrooms may become landscapes of condemnation, contributing to the making of early educational failure" (p. 266). The role teachers play in the lives of students is vital.

Teachers must leverage themselves in the quest to form positive and strong relationships with their students (Sanders & Jordan, 2013). This is one of the most important dynamics the children or youth may ever experience. The formula of success must be the people work over the paperwork. Accountability measures imposed by the state and federal government prescribing how schools should prepare students at key points along the schooling continuum (Cabral & Chu, 2013; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014) are of little consequence if educational leaders fail to grapple with the reality that students do not care what they are being taught until they know that they are first being cared for (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Ginwright, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muller, 2001; Noblit et al., 1995; Noddings, 1995, 2005; Sanders & Jordan, 2013).

This study can serve a transformative purpose for teachers and all those involved with the education system because it can advance discourse in educational arenas about the importance and value of positive and caring relationships between teachers and students. These relationships must denote the importance of teachers' recognizing their students in meaningful ways and

using the process of education to truly effect change in the trajectories of at-risk students' lives. It will only be through intentional acts by the teachers using the foundation of education that real learning and opportunities will occur that will shift these students from being viewed in terms of risk to being viewed in terms of their promise of success.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



College of Education
Office of Doctoral Studies

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Participant: _____

Principal Investigator: Cherina O. Betters

Title of Project: Bridge Over Troubled Water: Creating an Ecology of
Success for Students At-Risk of Their Promise

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate teacher-student relationships with at-risk students. This study is being conducted by Cherina O. Betters, doctoral student from the College of Education; Educational Leadership, under the supervision of Dr. John Winslade, Professor for the College of Education, California State University, San Bernardino for the purposes of completing the doctoral dissertation. Participants in this research study must be secondary teachers in a middle school setting who currently teach students identified as at-risk of school failure. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand how secondary middle teachers describe their experiences with students who have been identified in the public school K-12 setting as at-risk of school failure.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES: Participation in this study supposes the following from you:

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- 1). Be willing to participate in one face-to-face interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes.
- 2.) To ensure accuracy of information, you agree to have the interview audio-recorded. The recording will be transcribed and the investigator will maintain confidentiality by keeping your name and school district out of any publication that may come from this study. All state and federal laws will be upheld to maintain confidentiality and the recordings will be deleted after the transcriptions have been made.
- 3.) All questions for the interview will be given to you before the scheduled interview and you may chose to stop the interview at any time without penalty or consequence.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL: Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You may skip or not answer any questions and can freely withdraw from participation at any time. There is no compensation for your participation in this research study monetary or otherwise. Your participation in the study will be from December of 2016 to March of 2017.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Information gathered as part of this study shall either be stored in password protected computer or in a locked cabinet that only the researcher will have access to. The investigator will take all reasonable measures to maintain the confidentiality of the participant's identity and responses. Participant identities and responses will be coded for privacy purposes and only coded information will be used in accordance to federal and state research procedures on reporting the data gathered by this process. If the findings of this study are published, presented or reported on for professional review, no personal information about the identity of the participant or affiliation to the school district will be released. At the end of

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three years, all files collected as part of this study will be deleted.

RISKS: The researcher believes there to only be minimal risks associated with this study. As part of the research process, discomfort may arise from answering questions about past experiences. The researcher will work with you to ensure any concerns or questions are addressed throughout the process and discomfort is minimized to ensure no harm is caused to human subjects.

BENEFITS: There are no benefits to the participant by way of compensation. The information gathered as part of this study will go far to add and extend the body of research examining teacher-student relationships with at-risk youth as well as make policy recommendation to assist practitioners.

CONTACT: If any questions, comments or concerns about the research occur, please contact the lead investigator, Cherina O. Betters at (909) 790-8008 or 005414535@coyote.csusb.edu, or the dissertation chair, Dr. John Winslade, California State University, San Bernardino Department of Educational Leadership, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino CA, 92407 or email at jwinslad@csusb.edu or call at (909)-537 7312.

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT

I have read the information above and agree to participate in your study conducted by doctoral student Cherina O. Betters from the Educational Program at California State University, San Bernardino. I am aware that I may contact Dr. John Winslade, Ms. Betters' dissertation chair, at jwinslad@csusb.edu for questions or concerns.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I hereby certify that I am over the age of 18 years old and agree to participate in the research described above. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and all procedures are fully understood.

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Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

It is the assertion of the researcher that the research procedures have been explained and defined to the participant and being of sound mind and body, the participant voluntarily and knowingly have giving informed consent to be a participant in this research and I am cosigning this form as proof of acceptance of this person's consent.

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

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APPENDIX B
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

November 18, 2016

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Expedited Review

IRB# FY2017-55

Status: **APPROVED**

Ms. Cherina Betters and Prof. John Winslade
College of Education - Doctoral Studies Program
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Ms. Betters and Prof. Winslade:

Your application to use human subjects, titled " BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER: CREATING AN ECOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATIVE CARE FOR STUDENTS AT-RISK OF THEIR PROMISE" has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The attached informed consent document has been stamped and signed by the IRB chairperson. All subsequent copies used must be this officially approved version. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended. **Your application is approved for one year from November 18, 2016 through November 17, 2017. One month prior to the approval end date you need to file for a renewal if you have not completed your research. See additional requirements (Items 1 – 4) of your approval below.**

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

- 1) Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,**
- 2) If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,**
- 3) To apply for renewal and continuing review of your protocol one month prior to the protocols end date,**
- 4) When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.**

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required. If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Caroline Vickers

Caroline Vickers, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

CV/MG

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about why you chose to become a teacher?

✚ What shaped your decision to become a teacher?

2. How does a teacher convey to students that they are cared for?

✚ How would you describe your relationship with students?

✚ Can you share with me a story that illustrates what you mean?

3. *What is your definition of a meaningful relationship with a student?*

4. *How do you perceive your relationships with your students?*

✚ *Are you thinking of a particular student or group of students when you say that?*

✚ *What kind of students do you find most difficult?*

5. *Please describe the characteristics of an “at-risk” student? Do you believe that at-risk students lack academic motivation? Why or Why not? Do you believe that at-risk students are doing the best they can academically or something else? If yes, how? If no, why not?*

✚ What do you hope or want for these students?

✚ How do you help them achieve that?

(Developed by Cherina Betters)

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